

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 3 Adopted Daughter
of an Archduke Vol. 2

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**





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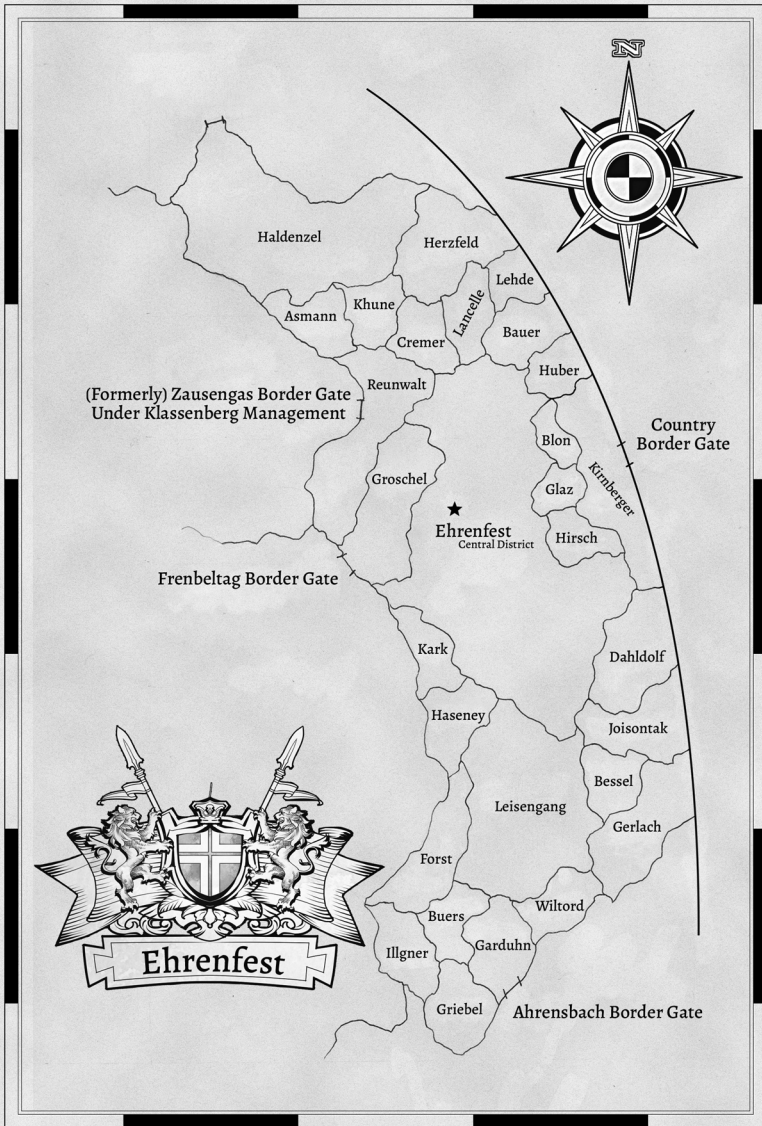
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The Archduke's Family

Rozemyne

The protagonist. She went from the daughter of a soldier to the adopted daughter of the archduke, changing her name in the process. But her personality hasn't changed at all — she'll do whatever it takes to read books.



Ferdinand

Sylvester's brother from another mother. He is Rozemyne's guardian in the temple.



Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.



Wilfried

Sylvester's oldest son, and now Rozemyne's older brother.

Cast of Characters

Summary of Part Two:

After becoming an apprentice blue shrine maiden, Myne built a workshop in the temple, giving food and work to the starving orphans while busily spending her days developing printing through trial and error with her Gutenbergs. However, she was suddenly attacked by a foreign noble brought in by the High Bishop. In order to gain enough status to protect her family and attendants, Myne resolved to become the archnoble Rozemyne, soon to be adopted by the archduke.



Karstedt

The commander of Ehrenfest's knights. Rozemyne's noble father.



Elvira

Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.

The Knight Commander's Family



Eckhart

Karstedt's oldest son. Works in the Knight's Order.



Lamprecht

Karstedt's second son. A knight who serves as Wilfried's guard.



Cornelius

Karstedt's third son. An apprentice knight who serves as Rozemyne's guard.

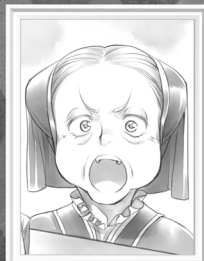
Angelica

An apprentice knight and a mednoble. A lithe girl of few words who has fairy-like beauty.

Ottilie

An attendant and an archnoble. Elvira's friend.

Rozemyne's Retainers



Rihyarda

Rozemyne's head attendant in the castle. An archnoble who took care of Ferdinand, Sylvester, and Karstedt when they were kids.



Brigitte

A knight and a mednoble. Giebe Illgner's younger sister.



Damuel

A knight and a laynoble who continues to guard Rozemyne.

Lower City Family



Gunther
Myne's Father.



Effa
Myne's Mother.



Tuuli
Myne's Older Sister.



Kamil
Myne's Little Brother.

Lower City Merchants

Benno..... Head of the Gilberta Company.
Mark..... Benno's right-hand man.
Lutz..... A leherl apprentice.
Gustav..... Guildmaster of the Merchant's Guild.
Freida..... Gustav's granddaughter.

Temple Attendants

Fran..... A cook who also helps in the High Bishop's chambers.
Gil..... A cook who also helps in the High Bishop's chambers.
Wilma..... In charge of the orphanage.
Monika..... In charge of the workshop.
Nicola..... In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.

Rozemyne's Personnel

Ella..... Rozemyne's personal chef. **Rosina**..... Rozemyne's personal musician.

Other Nobles

Oswald..... Wilfried's head attendant.
Moritz..... Wilfried and Rozemyne's instructor.
Justus..... Rihyarda's son, a tax official who accompanied Rozemyne during the Harvest Festival.

Other

Hugo..... Head chef of the Italian restaurant.
Hasse's Mayor..... A man friendly with the previous High Bishop.
Richt..... A relative of and assistant to Hasse's mayor.
Kantna..... The scholar put in charge of Hasse's printing business.

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Prologue

Tuuli was busy working at the table. Effa placed a cup of tea beside her, just far away enough that it wouldn't get in her way, then sat down to watch her. Tuuli had been given a truly ridiculous hair stick order by a customer, asking not just for decorative flowers but for autumn fruits as well, so she had been throwing herself into her work as soon as she got home from her apprentice job to meet that request. She had even kept going after dinner.

Effa sipped her own tea as she watched Tuuli work, waiting for her to approach a good place to stop before starting up a conversation. "Did you hear what the tiny new High Bishop did at the coming of age ceremony yesterday, Tuuli?"

"I heard Laura talk about it at work. Her big sister came of age this season."

Effa had heard about it from their neighbors whose children had come of age in the summer, and it seemed that Tuuli knew as well.

"We went to go and see Myne, but we weren't able to see anything since the doors were closed, remember?" Tuuli said. "I couldn't believe what Laura told me! She said that nobody was taking their prayers as seriously as the adults did during the Star Festival, so Myne had to make everyone repeat them."

Effa nodded with a bemused smile. The whole family had gone to the temple to see Rozemyne the High Bishop after the coming of age ceremony, much like they had during the Star Festival, but they hadn't been able to see what was happening inside as the doors were kept shut during the proceedings. And when the doors did eventually open, the family was so focused on spotting Myne and protecting Kamil from being crushed by the flood of new adults that they hadn't paid any attention to what anyone was saying. As a result, despite going all the way to the temple, they knew the least out of anybody.

"Laura's older sister was apparently really surprised to learn that a difference in the prayer can change how big the blessing is," Tuuli said, coming to a good stopping point in her work. She set down the hair stick, then moved to the next seat over where her tea had been placed with a smile.

Rumors of a tiny High Bishop capable of giving real blessings had spread through the town after the Star Festival marriages, and now people were talking about how she had made the youths repeat their

prayers at the coming of age ceremony. One had to wonder whether anything to do with the temple had ever been talked about so much before.

“Maybe they were all just caught up in the excitement of seeing a real blessing,” Effa suggested.

“But for the children, having a noble like the High Bishop tell them they weren’t taking things seriously and that they needed to redo their prayers was scary! They thought they had messed up and would get punished. Myne should know that. Geez...” Tuuli puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

“You aren’t wrong. But I think the High Priest would want to make sure that commoners don’t look down on the High Bishop for being small or treat her as a curiosity for being able to perform blessings.”

Myne had looked so much like a proper noble up on the distant altar that Effa doubted for a second whether it was really her, and when Tuuli had returned from delivering a hair stick to her in the temple, she mentioned that Myne’s movements were so elegant that she couldn’t believe she was the same person. Myne had changed so much that even her parents could hardly recognize her from afar, and Effa was genuinely worried that she might be pushing herself unreasonably far to fully become a noble.

“Repeating the prayer was a necessary part of Myne surviving as a noble. I’m sure of it.”

“Mm... I honestly think Myne was just being weird. I mean, nobody ever took their prayers seriously before now,” Tuuli said with pursed lips.

Effa couldn’t help but smile; maybe that really was the case. “Myne certainly would do strange things for reasons that only she understood, but now that she’s a noble, it’s hard to imagine she’ll be able to keep that up and drag everyone around her into her crazy exploits.”

“Well, Lutz said that she hasn’t changed much on the inside. He thinks she made them repeat their prayers so that the kids being baptized in autumn will know they need to take their prayers seriously to get a blessing. I think everyone will be more serious now.”

Once she had finished her tea, Tuuli returned to her original seat and got back to work on the hair stick. She had started over several times now, not at all satisfied with her first attempts, but now it was close to being finished.

“That hair stick is turning out really nicely,” Effa said.

“Myne taught me this stitching technique in her letters. I never would’ve figured out how to make so many different fruits on my own.”

“Not everyone could learn to crochet like that just by reading letters full of strange diagrams, Tuuli. What you’ve done here is really impressive.” Effa had watched as Tuuli pored over Myne’s letter, teaching herself through trial and error, so seeing the hair stick so close to completion meant a lot to her as well.

On top of all the fruits, Tuuli had made flower petals using thin, high-quality string. These had then been attached to a base with hide glue to make a beautiful three-dimensional flower. She had even been given a new metal hook from the Gilberta Company to make the hair stick, which allowed her to stitch the threads more tightly to make something even prettier than usual.

“It’s due in three days, so I’m gonna work for as long as I can. I’m not going to let anyone take the job of making Myne’s hair sticks away from me... because I think this is the only way I’ll ever get to see her.”

When Tuuli was at the Gilberta Company, Benno had apparently told her she would have even fewer opportunities to see Myne once she started spending more time in the castle. Knowing this, Tuuli looked at the hair stick with a firm glare, her blue eyes filled with resolve.

That night, while Gunther was drinking, Effa told him what she had spoken to Tuuli about.

“...She said that Myne is going to be spending less time in the temple, so we won’t have as many chances to see her. We might not even get to watch her from a distance after the ceremonies. And even if that wasn’t the case, so many of our neighbors are going to the autumn baptism ceremony that we can’t go ourselves, right?”

Effa thought it unlikely that anyone would connect Myne with the tiny High Bishop; Myne hadn’t spent much time with her neighbors, her funeral was over, and there was a considerable distance between the floor of the chapel and the top of the altar. Plus, according to Lutz and Tuuli, she carried herself so differently that she was almost unrecognizable. But having her family show up at the temple all the time would no doubt arouse suspicion. They would look weird peering into the temple after ceremonies, and if asked what they were doing, they would have no good answer.

“I know we have to keep our distance because of the magic contract, but I want to see Myne up close. I’m just really worried about her,” Effa said.

“Yeah. You’re the only one who doesn’t get to see her in person.”

As a soldier, Gunther had been assigned to accompany and protect the priests heading from Ehrenfest’s temple to Hasse, which would give him opportunities to see Myne. His excitement actually made Effa a little jealous.

“How about you go with Tuuli when she delivers the hair stick?”

“I can’t do that with Kamil at home.”

“You could ask someone to take care of him for you. Tuuli got to see Myne and she’s still real inexperienced, so I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

When she was growing up, Effa had often helped her dad, who was a former commander of the gate, at work. Her duties included serving tea at soldier meetings where various nobles were usually in attendance, and the language and manners she had learned from this put her on the same level as Lutz and Tuuli when it came to etiquette skills. If she asked the Gilberta Company, there was a chance that she would be permitted to accompany Tuuli to the temple to watch over her while she was still practicing her manners. But once Lutz and Tuuli had fully mastered polite behavior, Effa wouldn’t be given permission to visit nobles no matter how many times she asked.

Children grow up so fast. This really is my only opportunity... Effa thought, feeling an indescribable sense of panic in her chest.

“Your good manners are only gonna get you so far, though,” Gunther continued. “Once Myne moves to the castle, you won’t be able to see her no matter what; the likes of us can’t even go to the Noble’s Quarter, much less the castle. Not to mention, I can take a day off work to look after Kamil for you right now, but once you start working again, getting days off will be a lot harder for you.”

...He was right. Effa tightly gripped her chest. Her daughter had become a noble, and this was her last opportunity to see her.

“Gunther, could you ask for a day off three days from now?”

Effa asked the Gilberta Company if she could accompany Tuuli on her hair stick delivery, and they agreed. She would be allowed to visit the orphanage director’s chambers.

“Mom, remember to call her ‘Lady Rozemyne’ here, okay?”

“I know,” Effa replied, looking around the chambers.

Fran had said that it would be best for Effa to avoid coming to the temple while she was pregnant with Kamil, so this was her first time entering the orphanage director’s chambers. She had heard about it from Tuuli and the others, but all they had said was that the door led straight into a hall that was bigger than their entire home, filled with fancy furniture unlike anything they had ever seen before. It was hard to get an actual mental image from that.

Effa took in her surroundings while Fran guided her to the second floor. A single home spreading across more than one floor was such a foreign concept to her that she felt completely thrown off.

“Lady Rozemyne, the Gilberta Company has arrived.”

“Thank you, Fran.”

Rozemyne turned in her ornately carved chair, wearing a

beautiful, fake smile unlike any smile she had ever made at home. But her eyes shot wide open the instant she saw her visitors, and she let out a goofy “Bwuh?!” before covering her mouth with her hands. She was soon wearing the fake smile again, but it was clear to Effa that her daughter hadn’t changed at all.

Effa was holding back her laughter, and it seemed that Lutz and Tuuli were too. They were clearly struggling to keep straight faces as they listened to Benno’s greeting.

“This is a craftswoman who assists Tuuli in making her hair sticks. I have brought her here so that she could introduce herself,” Benno said.

Rozemyne stood up with a bright smile. “The hair sticks you make are my prized possessions. I would ask that you show me the new one in this neighboring room,” she said, before opening the door beside her bed and launching instructions at her knights and attendants.

Effa passed through the door, surprised that there was another room inside a room that was already so big.

The moment that the door had shut, Rozemyne shot a glare at Lutz and immediately turned into the Myne that Effa knew so well. “You didn’t tell me she’d be here, Lutz! I was so surprised that I thought my heart was going to stop!”

“Don’t complain to me. Mrs. Effa asked to come along out of nowhere, and Mr. Gunther took a day off work to look after Kamil. Fey’s little sister has her baptism ceremony in autumn, so they won’t be able to drop by the temple to see you then. If you’re so unhappy about it, I just won’t bring her here again. How’s that sound?”

“I take it all back. I was just so surprised that I didn’t know what to say. Please bring her whenever you get the chance,” Rozemyne replied casually, showing that no matter how dressed up she was on the outside, she was still Myne on the inside.

But Effa didn’t know how much interaction the magic contract would permit between them. She opened her mouth, then closed it again, searching for words to say but having no idea how she should talk to Rozemyne. If one thing was for sure, it was that she shouldn’t speak as her mother. Having Damuel the knight accompany them into the room made that more than clear.

Effa had met Damuel when he guarded Myne back in her apprentice shrine maiden days, and while she knew he was a kind, warm-hearted individual, he was still a noble. If she messed up here, she would never get to see her daughter again.

“...I am glad to see you well,” Effa said. After racking her brain, the only thing she could think to say to her daughter at their long-awaited reunion was a stiff, formal greeting.

Still, Rozemyne broke into a wide grin, her happiness more than

apparent. Effa knew that smile—Myne would make it whenever she wanted to be cuddled like a baby. But no cuddling would be permitted here.

“Tuuli, present Lady Rozemyne with her hair stick,” Benno instructed.

Tuuli gave a small nod and then delicately took out the hair stick, repeating the process she had practiced over and over again at home. Her movements had been a bit awkward at first, but now they were smooth and precise. Effa could remember Tuuli grumbling that Myne was still able to do it more impressively than her, and now that she had seen how gracefully Rozemyne moved, she found that easy to believe.

“Lady Rozemyne, I present to you the new hair stick.”

Tuuli had made a plethora of light-yellow petals, then fixed them together around a stem using hide glue to make what looked just like a real flower. The word “fancy” hardly did it justice. The flower had then been cutely decorated with orange leaves and reddish fruits symbolic of autumn. It was clear that Tuuli had poured her heart and soul into making the hair stick.

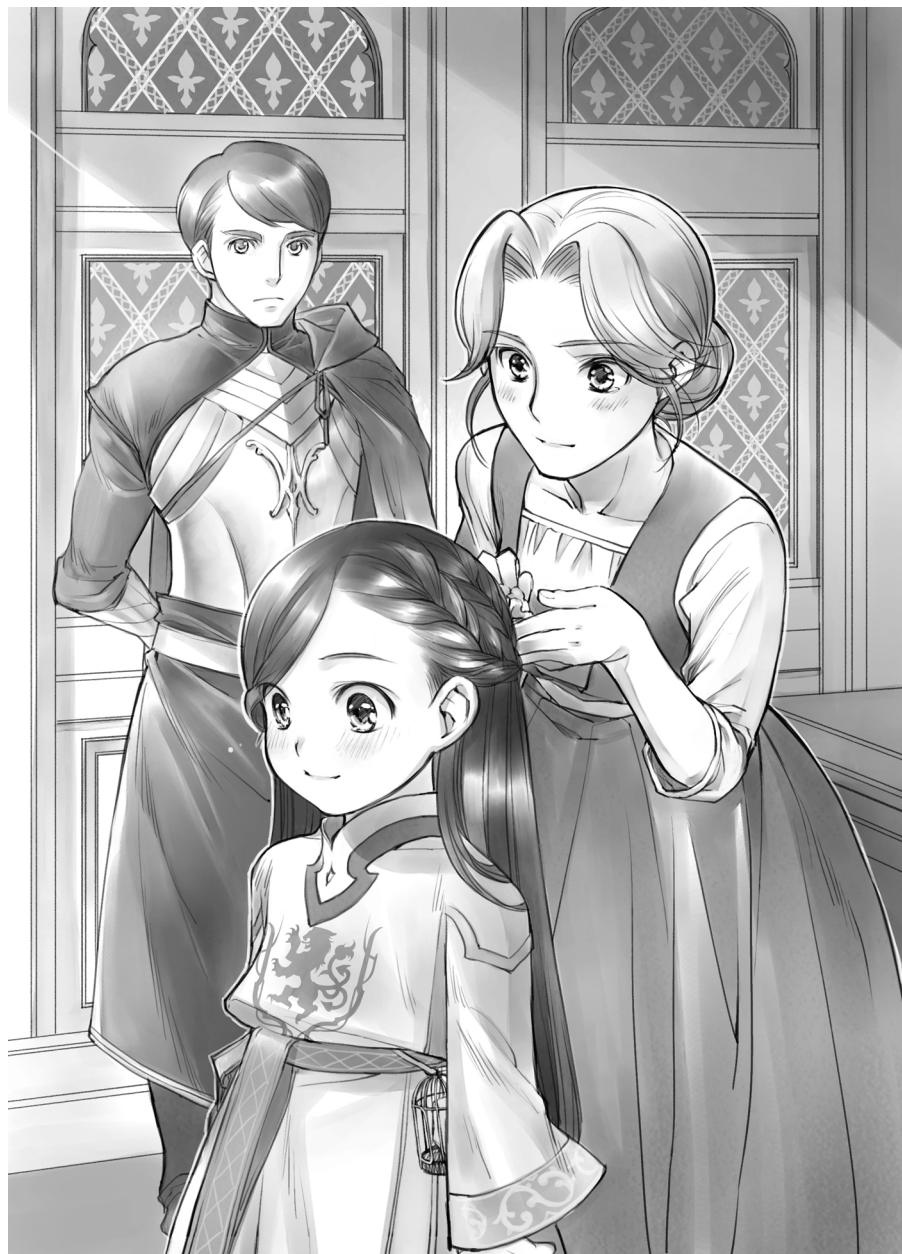
“Would you mind putting it on for me?” Rozemyne asked Effa, before turning her back to her.

At that, Effa looked at Benno and Tuuli, double-checking that she would be allowed to. She then peered over at Damuel, who gave a slight nod as if giving her his permission.

Effa picked up the hair stick that Tuuli had made, then slowly approached Rozemyne. Her intricately bundled hair was much glossier now than it had been in the past, and Effa’s hands trembled as she carefully pushed the accessory into place. At the same time, she gently stroked Rozemyne’s hair from an angle that Damuel wouldn’t be able to see. That was the best she could do for her daughter who was so desperately yearning to be comforted.

“Does it look good on me?” came a quiet, tearful whisper.

As Effa thought about how starved for warmth and comfort her daughter must have been, she could feel her chest tighten and her own eyes start to heat up.



“Yes, very. It looks... very good on you,” Effa answered, her voice trembling.

When Rozemyne turned around, Effa couldn't tell whether she was still smiling. The golden eyes looking at her were wavering, and it was clear that Rozemyne wanted to hug her and call her “Mom.” It was the look that Myne used to give whenever she was feeling anxious and craved comforting, like she was desperate for warmth and a temporary escape from the world. But after just a brief moment of vulnerability, Rozemyne snapped back to her senses and replaced the expression with a sad smile.

“I concur. It looks very good on you,” Benno said, stepping in to ease the mood. Rozemyne turned to face him, and by that time she had already put on the fake smile of a noble.

“The hair stick is splendid, Tuuli. It is even better than I had imagined it would be.”

Their conversation turned to business, and there was nothing more Effa could do. She took a step back and just watched Rozemyne talk. It was beyond frustrating to be within reach of her, but unable to actually hug her.

Is there a noble out there who's willing to give Myne hugs when she needs them? I'm really starting to worry about that now... Effa thought.

Discussing the Harvest Festival

With the hair stick that Mom and Tuuli had given me stuck in my hair, it was time for me to face the autumn baptism ceremony. During the summer coming of age ceremony, I had told the children that they needed to pray properly otherwise they wouldn't receive a blessing. It seemed that my instruction had since spread through town, as even kids as small as me were praying with serious looks on their faces.

I gave them a blessing while praising their faith on the inside, and the ceremony thus came to an end. But I couldn't help but feel a bit down about not getting to see my family.

"There will be a meeting at third bell today. Please accompany me to the meeting room." Fran made a sudden announcement the next day, and I cocked my head in confusion.

"I've never heard of meetings being held in the temple before. What kind of meeting is it?"

"Ah, I suppose this is your first meeting here, Lady Rozemyne. They are held the day after a baptism ceremony to discuss when baptisms will be held in the Noble's Quarter, and who will be sent where. In the autumn, it must also be decided who will go where for the Harvest Festival, and the same is done during the spring for Spring Prayer," Fran explained.

I clapped my hands together in realization. I had been kept out of the previous meetings since I was underage, and the priests didn't want a commoner butting in on such a considerable source of money. But now that I was the High Bishop, I would apparently need to participate in every meeting. It seemed that my status of apprentice shrine maiden really had just been for show last year.

"Fran, I know nothing of the matters within the duchy. Could I ask you to give me a brief rundown prior to the meeting?"

Once Wilfried finished learning his letters, both he and I were going to be assigned an instructor to teach us geography and history. But that was still some time away, and I couldn't attend a meeting about sending people across the duchy without knowing anything myself.

"...A map will be necessary to explain, but there is no time to borrow one from the High Priest. I shall put that aside for now and explain the Harvest Festival."

As the name implied, the Harvest Festival was a festival where farming towns celebrated their crop harvest and expressed their gratitude to the gods. Each town needed to be visited by a blue priest and a scholar, with the priests performing ritual rites while the scholars collected taxes. In farming towns, the Harvest Festival was also apparently when baptisms, coming of age ceremonies, and wedding ceremonies were held.

“Farming towns have such low populations that doing these events at any other time would be absurd,” Fran continued. They couldn’t feasibly be held during Spring Prayer since food was scarce from the long winter hibernation, plus everyone would be preparing to return to their summer residences.

Fran then went on to explain that, on top of attending these ceremonies, we would need to spend the Harvest Festival collecting chalices from towns with giebess—the name for nobles who ruled over land. Compared to Spring Prayer, where we just had to go and deliver chalices and give blessings, it seemed the Harvest Festival would be quite busy.

“It is third bell, Lady Rozemyne. Shall we head to the meeting room?” Fran asked.

The meeting room was about as big as a school classroom, and several long tables were lined up end to end in a big rectangle. A quick glance around was enough for me to confirm that all of the blue priests were in attendance, yet half of the tables were still empty. It was obvious that we had a serious shortage of priests on our hands.

All eyes were on me as I walked alongside the tables, eventually taking the seat that Fran had pulled out for me. I felt a little arrogant for sitting at the very end of such a long sequence of tables, but I was the High Bishop; I was of a higher status than anyone else here.

...Ferdinand’s always so cocky that it’s easy to forget I actually have more status than him here.

“I will now discuss the autumn baptism ceremony, as well as the Harvest Festival,” Ferdinand declared. He listed off essential topics one by one, progressing through the meeting at a steady pace. Along the way, Egmont complained that he wasn’t being given the same locations as last time, but Ferdinand silenced him with a condescending glare. “Why would you ever think your accommodations this year would be the same as last year?”

The scared blue priests had apparently all convinced themselves that, since I hadn’t taken action against them yet, they would be accommodated in exactly the same way they always had been. They sure were optimistic.

“Just because Rozemyne the High Bishop has not punished you severely for your past transgressions does not mean that you will be

permitted to act the same way as you always have. If you do not follow both her and my directives, expect to be banished from the temple,” Ferdinand stated coldly, knowing that the priests had no homes to return to. He then announced who would be sent where in the Noble’s Quarter for the baptism ceremonies.

“Why aren’t you or the High Bishop performing any baptisms?” one priest asked.

“The High Bishop and I have duties within the castle, not to mention there is the potential need for us to assist the Knight’s Order. What we do cannot be done by any of you, and thus I will have you all focus on the work that you *are* able to do. Furthermore, I intend to distribute future assignments based on your contributions to the greater good of the temple during the Harvest Festival.”

“I see. Thank you for your answer.”

Ferdinand also mentioned that the paperwork the previous High Bishop had refused to do would ultimately be distributed among the blue priests, but that seemed like something that wouldn’t be relevant for a long time yet.

“That is all. Everyone, formulate your schedules and take care not to procrastinate.”

In the end, the meeting concluded with me still not recognizing the names of any of the places where the priests would be sent. Fran had frantically written it all down on his diptych, so I would have him use a map to explain everything to me.

...Or so I thought, but Ferdinand called out to me just as I stood from my seat. “Rozemyne, I will give you more precise details this afternoon. Wait in your chambers so that I may visit you then.”

Not long after lunch, Ferdinand arrived with Zahm, who had all sorts of documents that he began spreading out on the table. Ferdinand instructed him on where to position the map and how to order the documents, then asked me just how much I knew about the Harvest Festival.

“Only what I heard from Fran right before the meeting. I barely know anything at all.”

“Scholars collect taxes; priests and shrine maidens perform rituals. We also collect some of each town’s harvest as a tithe, which you may use for winter preparations,” Ferdinand explained. That food would be a huge boon for the orphanage, but I wasn’t sure how they were going to handle all the crops that would surely build up in the carriages as they went from town to town.

“Each priest will go to fifteen different towns, right? The amount of crops they have to transport would surely build up very quickly, and wouldn’t some rot along the way?”

“For what purpose exactly do you think the scholars are

accompanying them? The collected harvest will be transported back to the castle through the use of teleportation circles.”

According to Ferdinand, teleportation circles were types of magic circles that came in pairs: one was used to send objects, and the other to receive them. The scholar would leave for the Harvest Festival with the sending magic circle, and would then send their gathered taxes to the receiving magic circle in the castle. The food gathered by the blue priests would be teleported there as well, and they would have to go to the castle themselves to retrieve it at a later date.

“I-I had no idea such a convenient magic tool existed...”

“What value would there be in a magic tool that does not make life easier? Take care not to waste my time by stating the obvious.”

Magic tools were apparently focused on practicality since they used up valuable mana, and a good magic tool was one that brought the most value to the largest number of people.

“I think that trade would improve and even flourish if merchants could use those magic tools,” I said. They were powerful enough to send a town’s harvest across the duchy all at once; if used for trade, merchants wouldn’t have to venture along their usual dangerous routes, and lower shipping fees would reduce the price of merchandise.

Ferdinand agreed with my idea, looking a little bored. “I, too, think that merchants would already be using the tools if they had mana of their own.”

“Ngh... Ferdinand, I would like magic tools that can be used without mana.”

“Such a thing would fundamentally not be a magic tool,” Ferdinand said, offering a flat response before changing the subject. “Now, regarding the Harvest Festival locations...”

“I didn’t recognize any of the town names, and I understood next to nothing that was said in the meeting...” I confessed.

In my lessons prior to my baptism, the only thing I had been taught that was relevant to geography was my extended family and the land they owned. But the provinces I knew were being visited by other blue priests, meaning I personally wouldn’t be going to any of them.

“I will be explaining that now. Take a look at this map,” Ferdinand said, and Zahm spread something out on the table. It was a map just like the one Ferdinand and Karstedt had been poring over prior to Spring Prayer, with land separated by red and blue zones. “The red area is the Central District—land ruled directly by the archduke. The blue area is land ruled by giebels. As this will be your first Harvest Festival, I have assigned you to towns relatively close to Ehrenfest,” Ferdinand said, before pointing at various towns and

labeling them “day one” and “day two” while Fran listed their names.

“You say close to Ehrenfest, but we seem to be going pretty far north and south.”

“That is because you will be gathering materials at the same time,” Ferdinand said, putting his finger on a place called Dorvan. It was the southernmost town I would be visiting. “The forest on the edge of Dorvan contains the feyplant known as a ruelle, which bears fruit on nights with a full moon. It is a known fact that autumn mana is strongest on the Night of Schutzaria, and that it is easier to gather Wind materials of potent magical energy then.”

“‘The Night of Schutzaria’? You mean the final full moon of autumn, when Ewigeliebe the God of Life resurrects, and Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind uses all of her strength to prevent him from reaching the Goddess of Earth?” I asked, thinking back to the legend I had read in the bible.

Ferdinand nodded. “It is good to see that your reading is producing results. Indeed, a ruelle fruit gathered on the Night of Schutzaria will be necessary to brew your jureve. Of all the autumn materials that can be gathered within Ehrenfest, the ruelle has the highest purity of Wind—the element of autumn—while also having an enormous quantity of mana within it, making it the best quality material that one could ask for.”

“What do you mean by ‘highest purity’?”

“A material that has one dominant element and only minor contamination from other elements is said to have high purity. In contrast, a material with multiple elements of similar strength is said to be multi-elemental.”

The potion I needed, known as a jureve, apparently required high-purity materials from each season, so it would take me at least a full year to get everything I needed. And since my mana had hardened so long ago that I didn’t even remember when exactly it had happened, I would need materials of the highest possible quality.

“As I must depart for the Harvest Festival myself, I will not be accompanying you.”

“Even though we did Spring Prayer together?”

“That was because we were faced by various dangers at the time, and there were also matters that I needed to investigate.”

It seemed we would be doing things separately this time. That seemed a bit bold, since this was going to be my first Harvest Festival. My face clouded with unease, but Ferdinand waved a hand at me dismissively. “It will be fine. In addition to your existing knights, I will assign Eckhart and Justus to guard you. Listen well to what they say.”

I tilted my head, not recognizing one of those names. “I know Eckhart, but who is Justus?”

“The tax official who will be accompanying you, and Rihyarda’s son.”

I had a feeling that Rihyarda’s son would be someone I could rely on. Ferdinand had probably selected knights who would pose no potential threat to me, and both Eckhart and Rihyarda’s son were close to the archduke in their own ways.

“Both the material gathering and the Harvest Festival will go smoothly if you follow their instructions. When the time comes, I shall deliver the tools that you will need to gather the ruelle.”

“I see you will still be working hard for my sake. I thank you ever so much,” I said, surprised by how thorough he was being. I could tell that he was determined to make sure the gathering was a success no matter what.

“There is still time before the middle of autumn when the Harvest Festival will begin. In the meantime, master flying your highbeast. Oh, and I received word from Benno—it seems he would like us to send the gray priests to Hasse’s orphanage.”

“Yes, I heard.” Benno had told me that the doors were now fitted and all the essential furniture had been brought inside. All that was left was moving the gray priests and shrine maidens over and getting them set up before the Harvest Festival.

“He has asked that we assign soldiers from the gate to protect the priests as they travel with all their food and goods,” Ferdinand continued.

There certainly was a lot of stuff we had to transport from our orphanage to theirs, and while Hasse was only half a day away from Ehrenfest, thieves would no doubt target us if we started transporting loads of goods day after day. In fact, we had apparently already been targeted. We would need guards, but soldiers wouldn’t be able to accompany regular merchants under normal circumstances; soldiers only acted when the city needed to be protected, or when the archduke ordered them to.

“We can assign guards to them since the Gilberta Company is working on the archduke’s orders, right?”

“Indeed. I was thinking of giving this duty to the commander of the eastern gate, if you have no objections,” Ferdinand said, glancing my way. He was talking about Dad.

“I’ll go by carriage, too!” I exclaimed, shooting my hand up in excitement at the prospect of seeing him. *I had been planning to go by highbeast since I’m not a big fan of carriages, but if it means I get to see Dad then I’m all for it!*

“You fool! A daughter of the archduke would be guarded by the Knight’s Order if she were to travel outside the city by carriage. A mere commoner soldier would not be needed, nor would they be of

any help whatsoever.”

“Aww, what?!” ...*I thought this was my chance to see him. This sucks.*

As I slumped my shoulders, hope turning to despair in an instant, Ferdinand rubbed his temples. “Let people finish speaking before you jump to conclusions,” he sighed. “You and I will be traveling with your guard knights by highbeast, but while you are staying in Hasse, I intend to entrust the soldiers with guarding you. You will likely get many opportunities to see him once you are in Hasse itself. Good grief...”

Ferdinand’s exasperated explanation shot my spirits back up, and I gave my thanks to the gods with a broad smile on my face.

Once Ferdinand had finished his explanations, I returned to the orphanage director’s chambers. I immediately asked Monika to fetch Lutz and Gil from the workshop, then eagerly awaited their arrival.

As soon as they showed up, I entrusted Damuel with guarding me and immediately entered the hidden room, pretending not to hear him mutter “Am I going to have to see *that* again?”

“Lutz! Luuuutz!” I sang as I leapt into his arms. It seemed he couldn’t keep up with my bubbling energy as he immediately gave in and hugged me back, warning me in a tired voice that I was going to catch a fever again.

“Eheheh. Guess what? Dad’s going to be assigned to guard the gray priests heading to Hasse’s orphanage. I’m going to see him again for the first time in ages,” I explained, feeling so happy that I could dance.

Lutz blinked several times, then gave me a confused frown. “...Huh? Master Benno said that the nobles would be traveling by highbeast, so not even the guards would get to see them. I heard from Tuuli and Mr. Otto that Mr. Gunther got so depressed over it that he was barely working at all.”

Word about the guard duty had apparently already reached the gate, and Dad had leapt at the opportunity the second he heard. Only later did he learn that I would be traveling by highbeast, and now he was so depressed that he’d been complaining each and every day about not wanting to go to work. In other words, he had gotten just as depressed as I had over us not being able to meet.

This sure is a weird thing connecting us... I thought, chuckling a little before explaining the circumstances to Lutz. “While it’s true that I’ll be traveling to Hasse by highbeast, the soldiers will be assigned to guard me while I’m there, so Ferdinand said we’d get to see each other every now and again.”

“Really?! Man, I’ve gotta go tell Mr. Gunther about that. He’s so depressed right now, and that’s just what we need to motivate him

again.”

“Uh huh. Tell him I’m looking forward to seeing him, too! Oh, I’ll write a letter to him,” I said, hastily scrawling “*I can’t wait to see you in Hasse. Good luck at work!*” on a sheet of paper which I folded and handed to Lutz.

The next day, Lutz came back with a grin to tell me how delivering the news had gone. Dad had apparently sprung back to life after reading the letter, so full of energy that it was almost comical. Mom and Tuuli had laughed about how nothing they’d said could cheer him up, yet a single letter had worked magic on him.

Hasse's Monastery

Today was the day that the gray priests and shrine maidens were due to move to Hasse. Two carriages that had been provided by Benno were lined up by the temple's back gate connecting to the lower city. Everyone in the orphanage had gathered to see them off as three priests stepped into one carriage and three shrine maidens into the other. Mark would be riding with the gray priests, while Lutz would be with the shrine maidens.

"Please take care, everyone."

"Thank you. I will watch over your esteemed gray priests, Lady Rozemyne," Mark said while kneeling. I gave him a courteous nod, there as the representative of the orphanage, but I couldn't help but look right over Mark's shoulders as I did. He and Lutz gave wry grins and followed my gaze.

There knelt a single soldier. Despite having been ordered to guard the priests from the east gate to Hasse, Dad had come to the temple to see the priests leave in their carriages. I greeted him as well, barely holding back my smile.

"I will soon be leaving for Hasse myself," I said. "I entrust guarding the priests to you."

"You can count on me," Dad responded, standing up with a grin and tapping his chest twice. I did the same, then watched the carriages depart.

I would be heading for Hasse three days from now, since that was the bare minimum it would take for the carriages to arrive there and everyone to finish settling in. As time passed, I counted down on my fingers how many days were left until I could go and see Dad again.

"Rozemyne, are you sure about this? I believe it would be best for you to ride with Brigitte," Ferdinand said with a surly expression when I created my highbeast at the temple's front gate. But I had taken my training seriously, and I was now good enough at driving Lessy that I would be perfectly fine on my own.

"Hasse is the closest city to Ehrenfest; if I can't manage to fly there, then there's no way I could fly the long distance required for the Harvest Festival. I'll travel by Pandabus for the sake of practice."

"I agree that you need more practice. However..." Ferdinand trailed off, being surprisingly wishy-washy about this even though he

himself had said that I needed practical experience.

“Lord Ferdinand,” Brigitte interjected, “if you are that concerned, may I suggest that I ride with Lady Rozemyne? As I am also a wielder of mana, we can evacuate on my highbeast if need be. This way, she will be safer than she would be otherwise.”

“True... Brigitte, would you feel comfortable doing that?”

“I have seen Lady Rozemyne’s improvement with my own eyes. She has my trust,” Brigitte said in a cool and confident tone, but I could see that her amethyst eyes were twinkling. It seemed to me that she was at least a little interested in riding my Pandabus. She made her highbeast disappear and walked over, so I opened the door on the passenger side.

Ferdinand lowered his eyes in defeat as he watched on. “If you insist, Brigitte. I leave her to you.”

Brigitte bobbed her head in a nod and stepped into my Pandabus. I got into the driver’s seat myself and closed all the doors.

“Brigitte, please fasten your (seatbelt). Pull this and click it into here...” I explained, putting my own seatbelt on to demonstrate. Safety first, after all. Only the driver’s seat had morphed to match my size, so the passenger seat beside me looked super big and tall from my perspective.

Stroking the side of her seat, Brigitte smiled. “This truly is a cute highbeast.”

“Riiight? He’s so cute, isn’t he?”

Ferdinand treated it like something weird, but I knew my Pandabus was cute. Maybe I would be able to discuss his cuteness with a fellow girl. I looked up at Brigitte with hopeful eyes, only for her to flinch in regret and awkwardly clear her throat.

“Ahem! Er, well... I meant that in the sense that it is a good match for you.”

“Ahaha. I thank you ever so much. Now, it’s time for liftoff.”

I gripped the Pandabus by his handles, poured mana into him, then stepped on the accelerator to chase after Ferdinand’s highbeast which had already flown off. He began running on his tiny red panda legs and, when I pulled the handles back, started soaring through the air.

“I never considered that one could sit inside of a highbeast. The seat is very comfortably soft, and it is nice that I would not necessarily have to change into clothes designed for riding highbeasts. I have a feeling that ladies in noble society might wish to copy this design,” Brigitte said.

It seemed that fine noblewomen had to change into clothes made for riding highbeasts, since sitting on the back of an animal required you to spread your legs to straddle it. But no such accommodations

were necessary to ride the Pandabus.

“Were there no carriages when highbeasts were first made, I wonder?”

“Highbeasts are made in the image of animals, and the spell is not equipped to create carriages or anything of the like. The concept of riding inside the animal itself is definitely new, and it is a very wonderful idea in my opinion.”

Retrospectively, I probably wouldn't have thought to ride inside of an animal either had I not grown up around anime and theme parks full of animal rides. But for all of Brigitte's compliments, I couldn't exactly celebrate much. After all, the original idea here definitely wasn't mine.

“I wasn't sure whether it would be trendy among women, since Ferdinand looked so displeased with him,” I confided. The Pandabus's legs waved about through the air as he followed after Ferdinand's lion.

My red panda is so super cute. Ehehehe...

Our highbeasts landed by the monastery. It appeared that someone had been keeping watch, as Benno and the others immediately came outside. The Gilberta Company, the gray priests, and the soldiers guarding them were all kneeling.

I climbed out of my highbeast and returned him to his feystone form, which I then placed in the cage hanging off my belt. It took me a lot longer than it took Ferdinand and Damuel, but still, I was getting better.

With that done, I took a half-step in front of Ferdinand. Had we been able to do things my way then I would have been hiding behind him instead, but I had been told it was improper for the High Priest to stand ahead of the High Bishop.

Ferdinand looked across the people kneeling, then nodded. “We appreciate your welcome. Now, we shall see the inside of the monastery at once.”

Everyone stood up. I made eye contact with Dad, who was standing at the very front of the soldiers, and we exchanged smiles. That was all we could do with Ferdinand and the others around.

“I shall start with the girls' building,” Benno said, taking the role of guide as he led us inside. The previously empty doorways now had doors, and there were boxes for putting personal belongings in alongside mattresses on the floor. “The beds should be ready by winter. Given the rush, we prioritized making the rooms livable.”

I nodded repeatedly; the rooms being livable was important. Boxes and mattresses were about all the orphans would need, since they didn't have many personal belongings to begin with.

“This room is for handling paperwork,” Benno continued. “There is an identical one in the boys' building.”

The room had been set up with chairs, desks, and writing utensils. The gray shrine maidens would be tasked with writing documents regarding food and living expenses, while the gray priests would be tasked with writing reports on the workshop.

The dining hall only had a makeshift table that consisted of a board resting on several boxes; the rest would be prepared later. The carpenters had been using it while working on the monastery, and it had apparently been more than good enough for them to eat on.

Since it was already the afternoon, the soldiers and the Gilberta Company would be spending the night in the monastery as well. That meant everyone would be having dinner together, which demanded an extra board or two be added onto the table.

Like in the temple, the basement of the girls' dorm was a kitchen, and it was equipped with pots, metal griddles, and an oven like in my kitchen. It also had wooden plates and cutlery, so eating here would be just like eating in the temple's orphanage.

"It is a bit excessive for an orphanage's kitchen, but we went the extra distance since we knew you would be visiting, Lady Rozemyne."

"I thank you ever so much. My chefs will surely appreciate it."

There was an exit in the basement of the girls' building just like there was in the temple, leading to the basement of the boys' building which had been made into a workshop. It had all of the tools and materials it would need to operate as a Rozemyne Workshop. The only things it didn't have were metal letter types and a letterpress printer, but given that the latter demanded the strength of several adult men and we had a shortage of personnel, they would be focusing on paper-making and mimeograph printing for now.

"We will bring the printing presses once more people have arrived, but for now this should be enough for the workshop to function," Benno said while leading us upstairs.

The rooms in the boys' building were just like those in the girls' building—furnished with boxes and mattresses to make them livable. It seemed that this was where the soldiers and the Gilberta Company would be staying.

"These kids are just orphans and they're living better than us, huh?" one of the soldiers accompanying us grumbled with a grimace.

"Would you like to become a priest too, then? You won't be permitted to marry or leave the temple, and your life will be constantly shaken around by the whims of blue priests, but if that seems like a pleasant life to you, then we would gladly welcome you into the monastery," I said, unable to remain silent.

They knew nothing about the orphans' situation—that they were stuck in the orphanage until their baptism, that they could easily be discarded if unneeded, or that they could die if there was no one

around to take care of them. And yet, they had the gall to say they lived better lives than them.

The soldier quickly noticed my frustration and the blood drained from his face. He knelt down and said, "Forgive me, I did not mean to offend," before offering a variety of excuses.

"Lady Rozemyne, it is understandable they would think that after seeing how we live now. It is thanks to you and your efforts in the temple that our quality of life has seen such dramatic improvement. They have no way of knowing how much worse our lives would be if not for you," one gray priest said, trying to console me with praise. All the while, I could see Dad proudly nodding along with a look on his face that seemed to say "Isn't my daughter incredible?"

...Don't just nod in agreement. Think about the soldier trembling on the ground right now. Isn't he yours? I thought, but seeing Dad acting so proud of me like usual eased my anger, and my shoulders soon loosened up.

"I imagine you spoke without thinking, but I would ask that you take care before making such prejudicial assumptions about others," I said.

"I have no excuse. It won't happen again," the soldier said apologetically. I had forgiven him, and so the matter ended there.

Next up was the chapel. It had two impressive, ornately carved wooden doors, which immediately exuded the majestic aura that one would expect from a chapel. As the gray priests pushed them open, I saw that the previously pure-white floor inside now had a carpet laid atop it, and there was an altar at the far end of the room meant for holding the statues of the gods. The chapel wasn't too large overall, but it definitely had the same atmosphere as the temple.

"Benno, when will the statues be ready?" Ferdinand asked, looking at the unadorned altar.

"I am told it will take one more month."

"I see. So they will be ready in time for the Harvest Festival. Excellent. Rozemyne, follow me; I will now make your room."

Ferdinand took out a feystone, pressed it against the wall at about waist-height, then made his schtappe appear and began to chant something. In no time at all, a band of red light started to stretch out from the feystone, extending up until it was about fifteen centimeters taller than Ferdinand before splitting in two and moving in opposite directions.

After growing for a bit longer, the bands suddenly bent at a ninety-degree angle and headed straight down, then bent at another ninety-degree angle just before they touched the ground. The two lines were now headed toward one another, moving parallel to the floor until they eventually fused back together. Finally, the light

stretched straight up to return to the feystone, which then started to shine intensely. When the brightness faded, the feystone was embedded in the door to a hidden room.

“Rozemyne, register your mana here and build your room.”

“Okay.”

I put my hand on the feystone and registered my mana with it, just like I had with the hidden room in my own chambers. Back then, it had been so high up that I needed to use a chair to touch it, but here it was low enough that I could reach it from the ground. It was only then that I realized Ferdinand had adjusted the height for my convenience.

I let my mana flow while thinking of my room in the temple, and when the door opened to signal the end of the registration, it revealed a room that looked to be exactly the same size.

“You may order furniture and any other things you need and have them brought here,” Ferdinand said, looking over at Benno and Mark. I followed his gaze. They were smiling, but I could see in their eyes that they were taken aback by being expected to do more work.

...Sorry. I'm really sorry.

“Oh yes, and pour your mana into this until the color has completely changed,” Ferdinand instructed, pointing at a feystone that was embedded in the back wall at the far end of the chapel.

“What is it?”

“Something essential for protecting the monastery. As of now, it still contains mana from when it was constructed, but that will not last until spring. Protecting this place is one of your duties.”

I steadily poured my mana into the protection magic tool to charge it. I had expected it to require a ton of mana to protect the whole monastery, but as it turned out, the amount it needed was surprisingly small.

We looped back through the monastery and returned to the front door; it was time for us nobles to hurry up and leave so that everyone else could get back to working on the monastery and preparing dinner.

“I see that the monastery is more than livable,” I said to a gray shrine maiden, who responded with a smile.

“Yes, I think we will be just fine here.”

“I suggest that you all stay here for a while. If everything is determined to be fine, we can go and get the orphans. We shall return in three days to check up on things. Please tell me then if you need anything else,” I said, giving each priest and shrine maiden a diptych. I had asked Benno to prepare them in advance since they would be essential for their work. “These have your names engraved on them, which means they are not shared property, but your own personal

belongings. Consider them my gift to you for the work you will soon be performing in this monastery. I pray that they will be of use.”

“We are honored.”

The priests, knowing that only my attendants had carried diptychs in the temple, broke into grins as they looked at their names on the diptychs.

“Lutz, is everything ready?” I asked.

“Of course,” he replied, handing me a cloth pouch that made a small clinking noise as it moved. I took it from him and turned to face the soldiers.

“Thank you all for your efforts in guarding us today. I cannot offer you much, but I hope to express my appreciation with a gift. You may accept this without worry,” I said.

The soldiers rarely went outside the city, so it wasn’t hard to imagine that their families would be worried about them being gone for so many days in a row. My gift was like a bonus, or a company covering its employees’ travel expenses. I intended to ask them to guard Benno’s supply caravans in the future, so the more they liked us, the better.

“It may come to pass that I ask you to guard us again in the future. If so, I trust you to serve us well.”

I handed them a small silver coin each, and eventually I reached Dad. Watching the others exchange greedy looks out of the corner of my eye, I sneakily gave him alone a large silver. “Please praise them for their work,” I whispered quietly, and Dad grinned in response.

At that, I addressed the rows of soldiers once more. “I must be leaving now, but remember that men are not allowed in the girls’ building under any circumstances. I trust that none of you are immoral men who would seek to lay hands on my shrine maidens, but those in charge should take care to keep their men under control. Violators shall not be forgiven under any circumstances,” I said, glaring at them to drive my point home.

Dad and the Gilberta Company were fine for sure, but people in the lower city looked down upon those in the temple’s orphanage. I didn’t want any of them to relax once I was gone and try to blow off some steam by laying their grubby hands on the shrine maidens. I wasn’t joking when I said that all of the shrine maidens still in the orphanage were absolute babes, so firmly putting my foot down for safety’s sake was crucial.

Ferdinand summoned his highbeast, so I followed suit and made my Pandabus. Brigitte got in with me, and off we went. It would be three days before we returned to Hasse.

Upon returning to Ehrenfest, I received reports from Benno and

Dad, completed the third picture book that I would be printing (one based around Leidenschaft the God of Fire and his subordinate gods), and met with Wilma to ask her to draw the illustrations. The three days passed before I knew it. Assuming the priests hadn't experienced any problems living in the monastery, it would be time to start thinking about bringing the orphans.

This time, we would be meeting the mayor of Hasse.

"Rozemyne, do you truly intend to make your attendants ride in that thing?" Ferdinand asked, looking at my family car-sized Pandabus like he was walking—or rather, flying—garbage.

"Of course. That's why he's a Pandabus," I replied, not bothered by his lack of taste in the slightest. My attendants were happy, at least.

"Woah, Lady Rozemyne! The door just stretched open! So cool!"

"Wow, the seat is so soft and comfy!"

Gil was so excited that he didn't even realize he'd stopped speaking politely, while Nicola's never-ending interest in new things meant that she was completely full of glee from the moment she had packed our luggage and climbed inside. Fran was the only one looking at the Pandabus with an expression of abject despair and grim resolve.

"I am prepared to travel with you until the end of my days, Lady Rozemyne."

"Fran, you don't need to look like you're about to step off a cliff. It's not that dangerous. Brigitte rode with me last time just fine."

"And I shall ride again. Fear not," Brigitte said, getting into the front passenger seat. Fran, steeling his resolve once and for all, clenched his teeth and climbed into the back seat.

"Does everyone have their seatbelts on? We're about to go," I said before flying off. Fran was nervously gripping his seatbelt, while Gil and Nicola let out cries of excitement as the Pandabus soared through the air.

"Woooah! So high!"

"Lady Rozemyne, the city looks so small. Fran, look out the window!"

"Gil, Nicola—you mustn't speak to Lady Rozemyne right now. She needs to focus." Fran immediately scolded them, and I couldn't help but smile.

"Fran, I can talk while driving just fine."

"Please don't. I beg you to focus."

We arrived at Hasse before long. My attendants started to unload my luggage once I had landed in front of the monastery, and a number of gray priests came out to help them carry it inside.

Once everything had been brought into the hidden room at the far end of the chapel, my attendants began setting up my room. It

wouldn't take long since we had only brought the carpet and tapestries with us. A spare bed from the temple would be brought here later so that I wouldn't have to worry much about collapsing.

While that was going on, Ferdinand and I were resting in the dining hall, being served tea by a gray shrine maiden while we ate the sweets we had brought.

"How is life here?" I asked the gray priests while sipping my tea.

"All has been well. Having the forest and river so close by has made paper-making much easier," one responded. There was a tinge of nervousness in his voice, no doubt due to Ferdinand being here.

I looked over to the shrine maiden who had poured our tea.

"Would things continue to be okay if we were to bring the orphans here?"

"I believe so. We can start preparing lunch so that they can be brought over at once."

At that, Ferdinand, my attendants, and I traveled by highbeast to see Hasse's highest authority—the mayor. Incidentally, despite us having informed them of our arrival in advance, the servant who greeted us almost immediately freaked out and started floundering. They probably hadn't prepared at all.

"Th-The High Bishop and the High Priest, you say?! Wasn't the merchant supposed to be the one coming?!"

Benno had passed on the announcement that we would be coming for the orphans, but it seemed he had failed to mention that Ferdinand and I would be the ones collecting them. Judging by how the mayor was practically frothing at the mouth when he burst into the room, I could guess that Benno had not been treated exceptionally well here.

"Where are the orphans?" Ferdinand asked sharply. "We informed you of our arrival ahead of time. Bring them here at once."

The mayor gulped in air and immediately had a servant go and summon the orphans. Soon, a crowd of bony-looking children with unwashed hair and dirty clothes came into the room. They reminded me of the temple's orphans when I first saw them, and a single glance was all it took for me to know how hard their lives were.

I counted that there were fourteen children, which confused me. "This isn't everyone, is it? I was told that there were more."

"I am sure that whoever told you that was mistaken," the mayor said with a smile as he knelt before us, only for one of the orphan boys to glare at him and shake his head hard.

"No, he's lying! He hid Marthe and my sister so he could sell them!"

"Shut it, Thore!" the mayor shouted, his eyes flaring with rage as he stood up to strike the boy. But Damuel smoothly stepped forward, pinned the mayor's arm behind his back, and drew his schtappe.

“Lord Ferdinand ordered all of the orphans to be brought forward. Did you not hear him, or are you deliberately defying him?” Damuel asked coldly. For a mere commoner like the mayor, defying a direct order from Ferdinand, the half-brother of the archduke, was like signing his own death sentence. He could be executed here and now without anyone batting an eye.

The mayor gasped at the sight of Damuel drawing his weapon with zero hesitation. “S-Someone! Anyone! Go get Nora and Marthe!”

Two young girls were brought into the room, both so pretty that I understood why they had been singled out to be sold. We now had the correct number of orphans that Benno had reported, so I began to speak to them.

“Would any of you like to move to the orphanage I have built? You will become priests and shrine maidens, but I am not forcing anyone to come against their will. You will have a place to sleep and eat at the monastery, but you will need to work and live according to our rules.”

The orphans fearfully looked between the mayor and I, aside from Thore, who simply looked straight at me. “If you’re not gonna sell my sister, she and I will go with you.”

“Thore...” muttered the older of the two girls, a worried look on her face. She was probably his sister.

The mayor reached out a hand toward her to interrupt what was happening. “Hold it. Nora’s not leav—”

“Silence. Lady Rozemyne has not permitted you to speak,” Damuel said, pushing the kneeling mayor’s head back down.

Ferdinand narrowed his eyes coldly at the mayor; that was the look he gave when he was getting annoyed. I turned my back to the chilly air gathering around him so that I could speak to Nora.

“What do you want to do, Nora? If you move to our orphanage, we will never sell you. But gray priests and shrine maidens are not permitted to marry.”

“Not like orphans can get a proper marriage anyway,” Thore spat out.

“I am not asking you, Thore. I am asking Nora.”

Nora lowered her eyes for a moment, then looked at me. “I’ll go. I won’t be able to marry here either, and I was about to be separated from Thore forever. Anything is better than being sold,” she said with a sad smile.

“Then I shall welcome you.”

“If Thore’s going, me and Marthe are too!” another boy said, taking the hand of the girl who had been brought in with Nora.

“Rick, you sure...?” Thore asked.

“If we stay here, Marthe’s getting sold next.”

It seemed that the other orphans didn't intend to defy the mayor, as they all just shook their heads and asked to stay. Whether they were scared of changing environments or scared because Damuel had been violent with their owner the mayor, I couldn't tell. But either way, I didn't intend to force them to join us.

"I shall take these four, then. Is that okay with you, Ferdinand?"

"Quite. We did what we came to do and nothing more. Let us depart."

The mayor just watched us leave in a daze, no longer having the two girls in his possession whom he had hidden from us to sell.

The New Orphans

The first thing we needed to do after taking the orphans into our care was bathe them. We had to scrub the boys and girls down in their respective buildings, then get them dressed in gray priest and shrine maiden robes before they could eat lunch.

I returned my Pandabus to his feystone form, then looked at my attendants. “Nicola, wash the girls in the girls’ building. Gil, wash the boys in the boys’ building. As for the soap and their clothes...”

“They will be the same as the ones used in the temple and have already been prepared,” Fran said, earning nods from Nicola and Gil.

Noticing that the four orphans were stiff with anxiety, I gave them a warm smile. “We can eat lunch once you’re clean. You’re all hungry, aren’t you?”

The word “lunch” made the orphans swallow hard, and while they exchanged scared glances over being separated, they still went to their respective buildings to be washed.

Ferdinand and I headed to the dining hall, then took our seats at the furthest end of the table. These were the seats for nobles. The table no longer looked exceptionally miserable thanks to Fran having covered it with a tablecloth, but that didn’t change the fact we were sitting on wooden boxes in front of a table made of boxes and a board.

In the temple, blue robes ate first. Their attendants would only start once they were done, and the leftovers would then be sent to the orphanage as divine gifts. This meant that nobody could start eating until we had finished, so we started lunch with Fran and a gray shrine maiden serving us. Damuel and Brigitte were eating with us as fellow nobles, as we didn’t have the time nor space here for the guard knights to eat separately.

“...Rozemyne, you have taught even gray shrine maidens to cook food such as this?” Ferdinand asked with a frown. He was paying money for my recipes.

“It all began when only one chef remained in the temple over the winter, which demanded that we use apprentice gray shrine maidens as assistants in the kitchen. But once they had learned how to make tasty food, they would naturally continue making it when they returned to the orphanage. The techniques just spread from there. It wasn’t as though I went out of my way to teach them, and the blue priests don’t know about it simply because they have no interest in the

orphange.”

Ferdinand, being one such blue priest, twitched his cheek ever so slightly. “So you have not only taught them letters and math, but how to cook as well? If other nobles were to learn of this, we would be swarmed with requests to buy them.”

“My children are expensive, just so you know. They have lots of special abilities. Considering that they serve necessary roles in spreading the printing industry and furthering my education reform plans, it would take a lot for me to sell one of them, even if a noble were interested. Plus, I now have the authority to turn those nobles down.”

The previous High Bishop might have been willing to sell them all off at the drop of a hat, but I was in the middle of training them for my master plan of spreading printing and building bookstores and libraries. I had no intention of letting them go so easily.

“What do you mean by ‘education reform plans’?” Ferdinand demanded. “I have heard of no such thing.”

“If more people don’t learn to read, there won’t be more people to write books, will there?” I replied. “I have a grand plan to increase the literacy rate within the duchy, though I haven’t ironed out all the details just yet.” I had several ideas swirling around in my head, but they all relied on printing being widely established to varying degrees.

Ferdinand glared at me as he dabbed his mouth. “Write a detailed report on your plan and deliver it to me when we return to the temple.”

“What? But I just told you, I haven’t ironed out the details y—”

“You have a clear history of charging into matters before the details have been ironed out. Write a report, even if you are just presenting a vague idea of what you potentially hope to accomplish one day.”

Unable to argue back, I had to acquiesce and agree to write a report. All while glaring at Damuel and Fran, who were nodding in complete agreement with Ferdinand.

“...Still, this turned out to be more troublesome than expected. What do you intend to do about him, Rozemyne?” Ferdinand asked with a sigh.

“Wait, who are you talking about?” I asked, blinking in confusion.

“That insignificant fool who is convinced that he has power to his name. Such small fry tend to harbor unjustified resentment toward those they themselves act against, and I expect his bitter attempts at revenge to be as tedious as they are obsessive,” Ferdinand explained.

I let out my own sigh once I understood what he meant. “He does resemble the previous High Bishop, doesn’t he? The way he tries to sell girls for money, mistakenly interprets the power of his distant

backers as his own, does whatever he wants like he's the king of his own little world..." I started listing out all of the ways they resembled each other, earning a small chuckle from Ferdinand.

"Their backers' power is almost incomparable in scale, but they certainly are similar in the lowly way they scurry about."

"Though in this case, since we don't know who his backers are, we don't know how much influence he has. How many people will we need to remove from power to eradicate it completely, and how will the city change once they're gone...? Hopefully the changes will be good for the monastery."

The High Bishop's power was largely constrained to the temple, so it had been easy for Ferdinand to fill the power vacuum when he was removed. For this reason, there hadn't been any problems to speak of. But now we were dealing with the mayor of a city that nobles never entered unless it was Spring Prayer or time for taxes. We could use our status as nobles to eliminate him, but who knew what would happen to the city once he was gone?

"Rozemyne, time spent thinking about how to make things go your way is time wasted. The future is always an unknown; the best we can do is what we deem to be right."

"...You say that, but don't you spend a lot of time thinking up plans to make things go the way you want them to?"

"The gods help those who help themselves," Ferdinand replied. In other words, you could justify anything if you used the right phrasing. I glared at him and pursed my lips a little, but with an unfazed expression he murmured, "There are few matters that can be settled through idealistic philosophies."

His words carried a weight to them that made it hard to argue back, as he had lived in noble society where idealism didn't cut it before ultimately joining the temple for his own protection.

"Lady Rozemyne, we have finished bathing them," Nicola said, bringing Nora and Marthe into the dining hall in their gray shrine maiden robes just as a delicious aroma started wafting through the air. The girls had been so dirty before that I hadn't been able to work out what color their hair was, but now it stood out against their gray robes and highlighted their pretty faces.

"Please state your names and ages," I said.

Marthe immediately hid behind Nora, who quickly turned around with an expression of motherly concern, her light purplish-blue hair swishing through the air as she did. She patted Marthe's head before turning back to me with bright blue eyes and a smile.

"I'm Nora, and I'm fourteen. I'm really glad you came here when you did, since I was going to be sold as soon as I came of age. Thanks for taking us in, really," she said.

I nodded and returned her smile, but Ferdinand's lips curved into a displeased frown.

"Such casual language..."

"Ferdinand, please don't have unreasonable expectations of people who haven't been educated. Those in the lower city are even worse. All that matters is that they learn to speak properly moving forward," I said, trying to console him.

It only made sense that there would be a big gap between the orphans raised in the temple and the orphans raised elsewhere; there were no blue priests in Hasse, so nobody would chastise them for coarse language or improper behavior. Ehrenfest's lower city was right by the Noble's Quarter, but a city without nobles had no reason to teach its kids how to interact with them.

"And what about you, girl hiding behind Nora?" I asked. But Marthe just fearfully shook her dark-green hair and kept hiding.

"Her name is Marthe, and—"

"Let me stop you there, Nora. This child must answer on her own. Her being shy or nervous around strangers might have been acceptable up until today, but if a noble were to visit and she were to refuse to answer their questions, that would be seen as defiance. And defying a noble leads to immediate execution. That much is common sense in the temple."

"No way..." Nora looked around in a daze, only to see Ferdinand, his brow furrowed in displeasure at her tone, and my two guard knights, who were visibly frustrated with how her and Marthe were conducting themselves but were keeping silent as I was speaking. Fran and Nicola had already started eating, so there would be no one to defend her and Marthe's improper behavior toward nobles.

"I have spent time with lower city commoners and thus understand how you two feel very well. But as a noble myself, I cannot allow this to continue. Commoners must display absolute obedience to nobles; you two will die if you do not understand this fact. Now, tell me your name and age." As I focused my gaze on Marthe, I couldn't help thinking *I suuure am the bad guy here...*

Marthe was immediately pushed forward by Nora, and tears welled up in her eyes as she choked out a response. "I'm Marthe... Eight years old."

"Very well done. I know that it will be hard for you to adapt to an entirely different way of life here, but nobody will sell you, and you will have food each day. I ask that you both dedicate yourselves to adapting quickly, knowing that you will be cared for in turn."

"Okay," they both replied.

But no sooner had I let out a sigh of relief at their understanding than Thore and Rick angrily started charging at me. "What're you

planning to do to Marthe and my sister?!”

“Stop. I will not be doing anything to them,” I said, but they continued charging this way. Before they could get much closer though, Damuel and Brigitte knocked them both back with light smacks. The two boys immediately fell backward, slamming into the boxes being used as chairs.

“Thore! Rick!” Nora cried.

“To think that you would charge at a noble... There is courage, and then there is foolishness. Were I any other noble, you two would both be dead right now,” I said.

They had acted so recklessly because they hadn’t grown up around any nobles. That was dangerous. At this rate, they could end up dying in the blink of an eye.

“Listen well, you two—it is crucial to be patient and calm when dealing with nobles, even when they do things you don’t like. There is a world of difference between defying the mayor, who is a fellow commoner, and defying a noble. He will merely beat you, but a noble will kill you where you stand without listening to a word of protest,” I explained.

The four orphans paled at the sight of my two guards, who were protectively standing in front of me with their weapons now drawn.

“I imagine that you heard me ask this of Nora and Marthe,” I continued, “but I will repeat myself: please state your names and ages.”

“I’m Thore, and I’m eleven,” Thore said, protectively standing in front of Nora and fixing me with a glare as he answered. He looked a lot like his sister; his eyes were just as blue as hers, and his hair was a similar color. It wasn’t hard to imagine that he had protected Nora from the countless men who had no doubt targeted her for her looks. I found his heroism and love for her admirable, and hoped that he wouldn’t let anyone take that from him.

...Though he’d need to learn to keep it down and not let his heroism tick off my guards and attendants.

“My name’s Rick. I’m twelve, and I’m Marthe’s older brother.” He and Marthe likewise had similar hair and eye colors—dark green and gray, respectively. Other than that, though, they looked pretty different; Rick had thick eyebrows and sharp facial features, while Marthe had cute features that seemed to reflect her shy, reserved personality.

“I am Rozemyne. Just recently, I was baptized and made the High Bishop of Ehrenfest. It is nice to meet you all. Now, we will postpone taking you to your rooms so that we can eat lunch first. Gil, you may begin eating. You have done a good job today.”

Fran stood up from his seat, having finished, and Gil took his

place. Gray shrine maidens then brought Gil some food, which he speedily started to work his way through. Once he was done, the gray priests began to eat. There was plenty to go around since we hadn't brought many orphans back with us.

"When the heck are we gonna get to eat?!" Thore exclaimed.

"...I'm hungry..." Marthe murmured.

I felt bad for the four orphans and their rumbling tummies, but they had to get used to how things worked in the temple. "Gil, please tell them the order in which we from the temple eat our food," I said, leaving the explanation to him since he knew the most about commoners out of all of my attendants. He nodded and began to speak.

"Food in the temple is referred to as 'divine gifts.' The noble blue priests eat first, followed by their attendants. The leftovers are then brought to the orphanage, where there is also an eating order: first the adult priests and shrine maidens eat, then the apprentices, and then finally the children who haven't yet been baptized."

"You are all old enough to be apprentices, so for now you may rest easy knowing that you will be eating together," I added.

When it came time for the apprentices to eat, food was placed in front of the four orphans. They would be serving themselves under normal circumstances, but since we had no idea what they would do, we decided to serve them first so that they could see what was expected of them.

"Not yet, I'm afraid—you must first pray in appreciation to the gods."

I stopped the four orphans, all of whom had started chomping down on their food, and made them repeat the prayer after me. As it was a fundamental part of life in the temple, it was something they had to get used to. I, too, had walked the same path before.

Once that was done, they got to work silently devouring their food, each with gleaming eyes. It was clear from the way they grabbed it with their hands and shoved it into their mouths that they had lived life without ever encountering the word "etiquette."

Everyone but me was looking at them with shock; Ferdinand didn't even try to hide the disgust on his face. It reminded me of how repulsed I had been when I first came to this world and saw my neighbors eating around the well.

"They are surely starving. I know this is not a pleasant sight for you, but this is how all untrained people eat. We have no choice but to teach them the proper way slowly over time. If nothing else, this will help us all appreciate the importance of education and how above average the children in the orphanage truly are."

"...Indeed. To speak frankly, I did not expect them to be this

boorish. The only commoners I know are those in the Gilberta Company,” Ferdinand murmured.

I let out a sigh. It wasn’t fair to compare them with the Gilberta Company. This was standard for poor people.

The orphans asked for seconds, thirds, and even fourths. When the time came to take them to their rooms, they each had their hands on their swollen bellies and satisfied grins on their faces.

Since we were in the dining hall, we headed to the girls’ rooms first. Boys weren’t normally allowed in, but I had decided it would be wise to show them the rooms just this once, so they could see that everyone was being treated equally.

We climbed the stairs and opened the first door to the right.

“This is where the apprentices will sleep. Adult shrine maidens have their own rooms further down the hall, but apprentices share rooms with each other.”

“This room’s so big we can all sleep together,” Thore said with a grin, but I shook my head.

“I’m afraid you won’t all be sleeping in the same room.”

“Why not?!” he exclaimed, as he and Rick stepped forward to protect their sisters. My guards and attendants immediately assumed their own defensive stances in response, so I raised a hand to stop them.

“Boys are forbidden from entering the girls’ building; they are only allowed to go to the dining room. You would normally not be allowed in here, but we brought you here today so that you could see for yourselves that the girls are being treated equally.”

Thore’s blue eyes flashed with rage. “But we’re siblings!”

“I know, but that is irrelevant. This is the girls’ building. Even their male family members cannot enter,” I explained. It was easy to imagine that they had spent their lives fighting to stay together and find a home for themselves, and while denying them that made my heart ache, I had no other choice.

“To other gray shrine maidens, Thore and Rick are not family—they are strangers and men like any other. Just as you wish to protect Nora, Thore, I wish to protect my gray shrine maidens.”

“Thore and Rick would never do anything bad to girls,” Nora said, her light-purple hair swaying as she shook her head.

I continued my explanation, desperately hoping they would be able to see things from my perspective. “I understand that. My gray priests would never do anything bad to girls either. But my word is not enough for you to believe that, is it, Nora?”

Nora inhaled deeply, lowering her eyes before once again shaking her head. I could understand that Thore and Rick wanted to protect their sisters, but I couldn’t allow men into the girls’ building.

“If you insist on staying together, you will need to sleep in the corner of the dining hall,” I said.

“That’ll work. Let’s make our own room in the dining hall,” Thore said in a cheery voice, but Nora and Marthe looked at me with worry. Their eyes asked whether they really could make a room there, and I shook my head.

“I will only be lending you space to sleep; the dining hall can be entered by all, so other men have free access to the space as well. It is not your personal area, and others will not be forbidden from entering your sleeping space.”

My repeated rejections must have finally touched a nerve, as Thore’s eyebrows shot up in surprise and his face twisted in anger. “The dining hall’s that friggin’ big! What’s the problem with us making our own room there?!” he roared. “Don’t you know how much it hurts to be taken away from your family?!”

I clutched my chest, and that was when I heard a loud, painful-sounding slap. Fran had smacked Thore across the face. Fran, who had been raised in the orphanage and taught from birth that violence was wrong under any circumstances. I looked up at him, wide-eyed.

“Fran...?” I whispered. His dark-brown eyes were filled with anger as he looked down at the boy coldly, dropping the temperature of the room just like Ferdinand did when he was angry.



“There is no one in the world who knows that feeling more than Lady Rozemyne,” Fran said, the fury in his eyes not easing for even a moment as he took a step forward.

Thore took a step back in response, clearly intimidated. “Th-The heck...?” he murmured.

Fran took another step forward. “Lady Rozemyne’s talents led to her being separated from her family at her baptism and instead becoming the archduke’s adopted daughter. On top of that, she has been assigned the position of High Bishop, which requires her to continuously move between the castle and the temple while suffering this sorrow of being unable to see her family.”

The four kids opened their eyes wide in shock, then all looked at me in unison. Fran shifted to the side a bit, so as to protect me from their gazes.

“Lady Rozemyne saved your sister from being sold, and although you will be sleeping in separate rooms, you will be permitted to live in the same orphanage. All thanks to her. She may forgive your ungracious rudeness, but as her head attendant, I will not.”

...Oh no. Fran’s patience has finally run out.

Fran hadn’t gotten angry like this when he scolded me for being soft on Delia or when I had gotten too close with Gil. He served me well, but I knew that Ferdinand was still above me in his mind, so I hadn’t expected him to get this angry over the orphans being rude to me.

The sight of the terrified Thore was enough to make me hurriedly stop Fran. “That will be enough, Fran. They have learned their lesson,” I said, stepping between them.

“But Lady Rozemyne...” Fran replied, angry enough that he tried to take yet another step forward.

“I understand that you are angry for my sake. Thank you. Your hand hurts, does it not?” I asked.

It was my fault that Fran had been forced to resort to violence when heretofore he had managed to avoid it. I just wasn’t a good enough noble yet. I grabbed his sleeve to stop him and clasped my hands around his reddened palm. His gaze moved down to his hand, at which point I looked over to Thore, who was holding a hand against his struck cheek, and Rick, who had stepped forward to protect the others.

“Listen well, Thore. Rick. I understand painfully well your desire to protect your families. I also understand that you are feeling anxious and uneasy here, in a world where everything runs on rules different from the ones you are used to.”

Throughout my life, I had experienced a vast number of worlds

with clashing rules and philosophies—the contrasts between Earth and this world, commoners and nobles, craftsmen and merchants, the lower city and the temple, the temple and the Noble's Quarter, and so on. I knew exactly how nerve-wracking it was to enter a new world, and how hard it was to live when its values clashed with your own.

"But you aren't alone, are you?" I continued. "You may not be able to sleep in the same room, but you will still be living together. Nora and Marthe will never be sold."

Thore raised his head and slowly blinked his blue eyes, seeming to understand for the first time that my words were well and true.

"You can sleep in the dining hall if you absolutely insist, but I think that Nora and Marthe would rest easier in the girls' building where men are forbidden from going than in the dining hall where anybody can enter. Am I right?" I asked. Thore was doing everything he could to protect his sister, but he hadn't actually asked Nora or Marthe what they thought. I looked their way and Nora immediately cast her eyes down, her long eyelashes pointing toward the floor.

"Thore, please go to the boys' building. We'll sleep in the girls' building."

"Nora?!"

"I don't want to sleep in the dining hall. I won't be able to relax with men I don't know walking around. It's been so long since I've been able to sleep easy... Please understand, Thore."

All it took was one look at Nora's faint smile to know how exhausted she was, and how many years she had spent living in uneasy fear. Hearing her words, Thore bit his lip in frustration.

"Me too, Rick... I want to sleep with Nora," Marthe said, desperately pulling on her brother's sleeve. It must have been rare for her to be so forward about her opinions, as Rick's eyes shot open wide in surprise as he looked down at her.

"...You sure you'll be fine?"

"Uh huh... It's not scary here," Marthe said, giving Rick a small smile as she removed her hand from his sleeve. Now that both her and Nora had expressed their desire to sleep in the girls' building, Thore and Rick had no choice but to concede.

"Now then, I will continue the tour..." I began, thinking that everything had been peacefully settled. But just as I was about to head toward the staircase, Fran raised a hand to stop me.

"First, apologize," he said to Thore.

"What...?" I asked in surprise.

"Lady Rozemyne is the High Bishop. I demand that you apologize for behaving so rudely to the High Bishop," Fran continued.

Bwuuh?! He's still mad?!

It seemed that Fran's quiet anger was especially persistent. I

personally just wanted to let bygones be bygones, but his expression and behavior made it clear that he wouldn't let Thore off so easily. It was the first time I had seen him like this, and it was beyond me to stop him.

It seemed I wasn't the only one unsettled by Fran's anger, as Nora immediately sucked in a breath and forced Thore's head down. Then, once she had her little brother on his knees, she knelt down as well and faced me to apologize. "I'm sorry. Come on, Thore! Apologize!"

"...I'm sorry."

Okay, they apologized. Isn't that good enough? I silently pleaded, looking up at Fran. Our eyes met, and he gave a small smile. But it wasn't his usual peaceful smile. Instead, it was like... an ice-cold smile that lacked any trace of warmth.

"Lady Rozemyne, I suggest that we leave the tour to Gil and Nicola."

"Um, Fran?"

"I would like to discuss this matter in more detail. Gil, Nicola—please take them away," Fran ordered.

Gil and Nicola stammered out words of agreement, then raced down the stairs with the four orphans so quickly that they were practically fleeing from him.

...Wait, no! Don't leave me behind! I cried out on the inside, but Fran's coldness seemed to propel them forward and they were gone in the blink of an eye. Now it was just Fran, my two guards, Ferdinand, and me. As you might expect, Ferdinand was wearing a smile that was just as frosty as Fran's, and I instantly broke out in a cold sweat.

"Now then, Lady Rozemyne. Let us discuss this matter in your room," Fran said.

"Indeed," Ferdinand agreed. "It seems we have much to teach her."

"O-Okay!" I squeaked.

These two are way too similar. It's honestly terrifying. Somebody, help me!

But nobody came. It was at times like these that I wanted protection the most, but my two guards wouldn't even look me in the eyes.

The Orphan's Treatment and Investigating the City

Fran would never go anywhere near the orphanage director's hidden room back at the temple, but perhaps due to this place being different or the anger that was consuming him, he went into the monastery's hidden room without an ounce of hesitation. Once there, he spoke immediately and with a severe expression.

"You must not permit the orphans to be rude to you. You are already looked down upon for your youth, and if you permit rudeness then they will only move to exploit you further," he said, at which point my two guards raised their chins slightly in subtle agreement. "What I fear most is you permitting their rudeness, encouraging their arrogance, and then ultimately being displeased by what they proceed to do."

"Indeed. It is especially a concern because you entirely lose control of your mana when angry. There is always much collateral damage," Ferdinand added.

I hung my head, unable to argue back. My intention had been to be kind to them as they were newcomers, but apparently that wasn't a good idea at all.

"All things demand care and caution at first—kindness is a virtue, after all. But do not conflate kindness with being soft and weak."

"...I will be more careful," I said. I meant it, too. I didn't want to keep forcing Fran to strike others, nor did I want both him and Ferdinand to get so angry at me again.

"Rozemyne, hardening your soft nature is a significant concern, but our priority should no doubt be training those orphans. What in the world was with their crude manner of speech? And I could hardly stand to watch them eat," Ferdinand said, his brow wrinkled as he thought back to lunch.

People ate like that all the time in the lower city, but I couldn't just ask Ferdinand to understand that and let the matter go. The orphans had entered the temple, so they needed to learn basic etiquette.

"I have no idea where to begin with such poor creatures, so I would hope you have some plan for them. How does the Gilberta Company handle commoners?" Ferdinand asked.

But the Gilberta Company was one of the richest stores in the

lower city, and generally only took on apprentices from stores that already had experience doing business with nobles. Lutz had been on the same level as the orphans when Benno hired him, but he was smart, a fast learner, and very dedicated to improving. It wouldn't be fair on the orphans to compare them to him.

Fran suddenly looked up as though he had realized something. "Given that there are only four of them, perhaps it would be best to take them back to the temple," he suggested. His reasoning was that they would learn better at the temple's orphanage since that was where the other kids were being taught. That would no doubt provide them a good learning environment, but it would just stress them out if we took them there before they were better used to this way of life.

When I had first gone to the temple, I had agonized over how different the culture there was. But I had a home to return to. I had Lutz and my family there for comfort. I could complain that nothing made sense and they would agree, which was incredibly important. They would have nowhere to escape to if we moved them to the temple now, and with their entire family feeling the same stress for the same reason, it was hard to guess how much comfort they would be able to find in each other.

"I suggest we wait a bit longer before taking them to the temple; it will be ideal for them to learn its ways on familiar ground first. At this rate, they are bound to experience much conflict at the temple, and it would be best to give them the opportunity to return to the mayor should they find adjusting impossible."

"Lady Rozemyne?" Fran looked visibly confused, having not once in his life thought about leaving the temple.

"We still don't know whether they will all adjust to the temple's way of life, do we? The girls might wish to stay here to avoid being sold, but it is possible that the boys will prefer the freedom granted to them by the mayor," I explained. The most freedom this orphanage offered was letting everyone go to the forest to gather and make paper, so I could imagine that the mayor giving them more than that would play a big part in whatever decision they ended up making. "I suggest we wait for the Harvest Festival to end. If they all decide to stay, we can take them to the temple for the winter. By that time, they will no doubt have adjusted to life here."

"In that case, how shall we train them?" Fran asked. "Putting aside the young one, it is rare for children that old to enter the temple, and I have no experience training them."

In the lower city, kids generally got jobs as soon as they were baptized. They worked as apprentices, and those whose parents died would become live-in apprentices, with the store then looking after them. While it wasn't unusual for pre-baptism children to be sent to

the orphanage when they had no family to take them in, it was extremely rare for this to happen to children old enough to be apprentices.

“Do the children here not take on apprentice work?” I asked.

“For those whose parents are farmers, their fields would be requisitioned the moment both parents die. I imagine that underage children would not be able to grow enough to eat on the amount of land given to them, though I must confess that I do not know the details,” Ferdinand said with a light sigh. He had looked over related tax documents before, but since he had never actually observed the life of a farmer, he wasn’t entirely sure what happened to the orphans.

“...Then I suppose we have no choice but to start from the beginning and teach them like we would teach any new children.”

“And by that you mean...?”

“I imagine that every aspect of life here will be drastically different from what they’re used to—even something as simple as how food is served,” I explained. “In many ways, the temple follows the same rules as a noble’s mansion. We will have to begin by carefully teaching them how to use cutlery.”

It was common in the lower city to just eat with your hands, so much so that the temple’s orphanage was considered the odd one for teaching kids to use cutlery.

“From that point, we will need to teach them to clean,” I continued. “Lutz gave high praise to the priests for how quick, efficient, and thorough their cleaning was, and I imagine the cleaning skills these orphans learned under the mayor will not suffice in the temple.” From what I could remember, Lutz had mentioned being taught to clean by Gil, and then passing the techniques on to the other apprentices in the Gilberta Company. “However, please be sure to always teach them together as a group. Ensure this is done when taking them to the forest to gather, when making paper, and when cooking. They should learn together, not separately.”

“And why is that?” Ferdinand asked, presumably having been planning to assign an individual tutor to each orphan since there were only four of them and we had a total of six priests and shrine maidens.

“They will learn faster if they’re together. Groups will breed competition, and they will be able to teach each other as well. You mustn’t look down on the power of groups,” I said, using the kids competing over karuta as an example.

Ferdinand blinked, then murmured, “So it is similar to how the Royal Academy encourages growth,” before looking at me with an unsettling smile. I got the feeling he had started cooking up some kind of weird plot, but that was probably just my imagination.

“In any case, I say we focus on helping them adjust to life here for

the time being. Please never forget how difficult and time-consuming it is for outsiders to adjust to the temple's way of life. Teach them slowly and with great patience."

"Understood. I will convey this information to the priests," Fran said, now back to wearing his usual peaceful expression.

"Now then, with that settled, let us return to the temple and investigate Hasse a bit more," Ferdinand said.

"What? But we've already done an investigation," I replied. We had already had scholars and the Gilberta Company look the place over and inform us of their findings, but Ferdinand just tapped his temple with his pointer finger while looking at me.

"You fool. Their investigation was centered around making a workshop here, so most of the information they gathered was about the population, geography, and businesses. These are all irrelevant to what I am talking about. What we are going to investigate is which nobles are backing the mayor, how much power and influence he has accumulated, how many of his associates we will need to eliminate if we take action against him, and how we are going to fill the power vacuum afterward. This is entirely separate from investigating the best location for a workshop."

It seemed that Dark Ferdinand had appeared and was more than ready to operate in the shadows. But, well, I would just leave that to him. I wasn't really suited to deception and trickery; my head was better used in other places.

I exited the room once our conversation was over to find Gil and Nicola looking this way, their faces clouded with worry. I smiled to show them that everything was okay, and their expressions brightened in relief. The four orphans looked equally concerned, and then equally relieved when they saw that Fran was calm again.

"We will visit again five days from now," I said to the gray priests. "In the meantime, we will investigate the mayor to see which nobles he is connected to and how much influence he has. We shall ask Benno and Gustav to take care of any food matters, so I ask that you try not to leave the monastery if you can help it. Take care not just of the new orphans we have welcomed, but yourselves as well."

They knelt down and replied "As you wish." By that point, the four orphans were kneeling in the same way as well.

"...The monastery has magic protecting it, so you will be safe as long as you stay inside, even if the mayor comes. But we can offer no such protection if you leave, so be careful," I warned.

The four orphans nodded with worried looks on their faces, each knowing the mayor well.

Ferdinand summoned Benno the second we got back to the

temple; he wanted to get as many details as he could about Hasse and its mayor. Thankfully, Benno managed to arrive at the temple in the blink of an eye, entirely as if he had been expecting the summons.

“We went and acquired the orphans. Our reception was... less than stellar. And you expected that, did you not, Benno?”

“Oh yes, the mayor’s reception was always less than stellar. It’s behavior you will only ever see in Hasse,” Benno said with a grin. It seemed that he had intentionally not told the mayor that the High Bishop and High Priest would be the ones going to fetch the orphans, so he had been waiting for us to summon him ever since we left.

According to Benno, the city of Hasse was abnormal in how unusually powerful the mayor was. It was so close to Ehrenfest that nobles on long journeys would pass it by and stay the night at Dinkel instead, so they only ever visited for the Spring Prayer and Harvest Festival. Those who were traveling on foot might stop in Hasse, but most nobles simply did not.

Furthermore, Hasse was close enough to Ehrenfest that merchants were less valuable than they would be in other cities. This was because people could just go to Ehrenfest’s markets if they wanted goods, or do trade with the traveling merchants who always passed through Hasse on their way to Ehrenfest.

On top of all that, Hasse had a winter mansion. Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival were held in Hasse, and people from neighboring farming cities gathered there for the winter. The mayor had control over how all of these people were accommodated, so he had a considerable amount of influence across the region.

“Nobles can leave Ehrenfest without passing through the gates by using highbeasts,” Benno said. “I do not know which particular nobles the mayor has connections with, but I have heard they are high-ranking ones.”

“I see. The only one we knew for sure was the former High Bishop.”

“Him again?” I asked, exhausted. It honestly sucked that I had to deal with the old High Bishop more now that he was dead than I did when I was living in the temple and doing my best to avoid him.

“The former High Bishop did not have a highbeast and could only travel by carriage, making it more likely for him to stay at Hasse, and he no doubt used his status as the archduke’s uncle to do whatever he wished. The mayor’s defiance of you and I, the new High Bishop and the High Priest, makes that more than clear. He likely determined that no matter what happened, he could just call on the former High Bishop for help,” Ferdinand said, adding that, since he had seen me as a blue shrine maiden back during Spring Prayer, he had likely assumed we had been sent by the former High Bishop. Some people

also apparently looked down on Ferdinand, thinking he was a leech borrowing the High Bishop's power like the other blue priests were.

"I imagine, then, that the mayor has no idea whatsoever that the previous High Bishop was arrested. Benno, how much does the lower city know about the previous High Bishop?" Ferdinand asked.

"Nothing at all," Benno replied instantly, which made Ferdinand's eyes widen. He then furrowed his brow in a frown for a moment as he searched for words.

"...Surely that is an exaggeration. After all, a new High Bishop appeared. They must know something."

"Rumors of the new High Bishop being the archduke's young daughter have spread, as well as rumors of her being a saint who can give real blessings, but there has been no talk whatsoever of the former High Bishop. I imagine that people either assume he retired due to old age, or simply changed profession."

Apparently, the legend of Rozemyne the Saint really was spreading through the city. I had heard ahead of time that it would be necessary to fully justify my assignment to the role of High Bishop, but honestly, it was so embarrassing that I could barely stand it.

"I am fairly suspicious that the scholars I accompanied have connections to the mayor as well. It seems they engaged in some kind of secret discussion once my associates and I left his estate," Benno said, telling us everything he knew.

Ferdinand began to think over everything he had learned. His brow was firmly knitted, and I silently watched as he tapped his temples. Only after several minutes of deep thought did he finally let out a murmur.

"A thorn in my side even after death, I see..."

The Monastery's Barrier

“Wilma, does the temple orphanage have enough resources to house more people over the winter?” I asked, referring to those in Hasse’s orphanage.

In response, Wilma retrieved some documents from last year and started flipping through them. “Our winter preparations will need to be more extensive than they were last year, but we should have enough rooms. All we lack is bedding, tableware, and eating utensils.”

There was no issue accommodating the three priests and three shrine maidens as they had initially come from Ehrenfest’s orphanage, but according to Wilma, we didn’t have everything we needed for the four newcomers—that is, Nora and the others. This would be the only winter they spent in the temple since they were only being brought here for their education, and with that in mind, it would be more efficient to just bring what they needed from Hasse than to buy entirely new things.

“I see. I don’t have an exact number for you, but please make plans under the assumption that there will be ten more people living here over the winter. There shouldn’t be any issues since we have more time and money than we need this year—all thanks to you, Wilma, I might add.”

“My one regret is that the High Priest forbade us from ever doing it again. Ahaha.”

The sales from Ferdinand’s charity concert had really plumped up our wallets this year. They were essentially bursting at the seams, and it was all thanks to Wilma’s illustrations completely selling out. We couldn’t waste any of the money since we needed it to build orphanages and workshops in other cities, but preparing the temple orphanage for winter was a good cause too.

“Incidentally, how are the illustrations of the summer subordinate gods going? Are they nearly finished?”

“Yes, most of them are done. There is still one more I need to complete, but I believe they started printing the ones I already finished today,” Wilma explained.

Gil had mentioned that they finished printing the text, but apparently they had now started printing the art as well. They would probably be putting the books together in just a few days’ time.

“Tell me, Wilma... Do you think we could make picture books for

the autumn and winter subordinate gods before the time comes for winter socializing?”

“That will be somewhat difficult. With all the winter preparations, there simply isn’t enough time.”

Rich people and nobles were the primary demographic for picture books, so having the series done before winter socializing would have likely led to a boost in sales. But if it wasn’t feasible, then that was that; we could just have them ready for next year instead.

“Lady Rozemyne, what should we do as winter handiwork? Shall we make toys as we did last year?”

“Yes, everyone should be capable of woodwork like that. I believe it will be a few more years before playing cards and reversi begin to sell en masse, so we should build up stores of as many as we can in the meantime. That way, we can sell them at the peak of demand and before any imitations arrive on the market, then think of other products to make.”

All of the makeable things I could remember were simple in design, so I had no doubt that they’d be copied in no time. Our best bet was to accept that copycats would appear and focus on selling new products instead.

“I see that you have your hands full making money even now that you are the High Bishop, Lady Rozemyne.”

Okay, fair observation. But to be clear—and to protect the honor of my noble parents—I was being given more than enough money to live comfortably, unlike before when I had to earn my own to survive as an apprentice blue shrine maiden. I was plotting to make money here for the orphanage’s sake, and to spread printing for my books.

“The orphanage must earn enough money to cover its operating costs. If you rely on funding from nobles, you will be back at square one the moment that funding disappears. My duty as High Bishop is to ensure that the orphanage will continue to function with or without me.”

“I am ever so pleased to hear such comforting words, Lady Rozemyne.”

“...And so, it seems the orphanage will be able to accommodate everyone. But there is one thing I wanted to ask about,” I said to Ferdinand, having just reported what I had discussed with Wilma. “High Priest, would it be acceptable for me to sell picture-book bibles in the castle?”

“Hold on... Where exactly in the castle do you intend to sell them?” Ferdinand asked, his light-gold eyes hardening a little as he glared at me. He was a teensy bit more sensitive about me selling things ever since I had sold illustrations of him without permission.

“Nowhere. I’m just asking whether I can. In the lower city, only rich people like merchants can read and buy picture books, but everyone is a potential customer when it comes to nobles. I think it would be nice to sell them to nobles with children during winter socializing,” I explained.

Ferdinand tapped his temples. “I suppose that is better than you selling strange illustrations...” he murmured, before promising to get me permission to sell them in the castle at the end of winter. “You may sell them as parting gifts to nobles leaving for their provinces. During the winter, you will first draw the attention of the children using the karuta and the book about the primary gods. That way, when it comes time to leave, no parent will be able to refuse a new picture book—especially given that yours are exceptionally cheap for what they contain.”

Never in my life did I think Ferdinand would give me business advice like that.

“...That said, it will be a tough sell unless their children have become interested in reading by that time. The price is reasonable if they think it will be useful to their studies, but otherwise it will seem a bit high.”

“Children come to winter socializing as well?” I asked. The answer was probably yes, given that he had mentioned drawing their attention with karuta and picture books. My plan had been to shill the latter to the parents, but things would go a lot more smoothly with kids around.

“Those who have been baptized do. It becomes an opportunity for them to learn culture at a young age, as well as a place to be taught the noble hierarchies. As for you, winter socializing is where you will search for and nurture your future retainers.”

Eugh... I don't want to deal with all that. It sounds like it's going to be a huge pain in the neck. I won't be able to spend all my time working on picture books then, I guess. Looks like I have a busy winter ahead of me.

That was when I remembered what I had spent the previous winter doing.

“Wait, doesn’t the temple have the Dedication Ritual over the winter? Surely I won’t have time to be involved in socializing.”

“You will have time, and you will participate in both. I do so every year.”

Ferdinand, in all his supreme competence, apparently commuted between the castle and the temple each year. But expecting the same from me in all of *my* supreme incompetence was a bit much, especially considering my ill health. Fran had a full understanding of my health, but even with him keeping his eyes on me at all times, I had still ended up being forced to drink potions time and time again. I

wouldn't last commuting between the castle and the temple.

"Ferdinand, I think I might die this winter."

"Fear not, I won't let you die that easily. There will be potions ready for you," he replied. It seemed that he was willing to brew potions for me, but not lessen my workload. Talk about mean.

"...At least don't make them too bitter," I requested.

Ferdinand frowned, no doubt considering how many potions he should brew, and that was when I felt goosebumps rise all over my arms.

"Eeep?!"

It wasn't like it was cold or anything—a sudden gross shudder had run down my spine, and a sickening sensation washed over me as thoughts of Hasse's monastery flashed through my mind out of nowhere.

"Ferdinand, something weird just happened..." I said, looking toward him for an explanation. He stood up, looking like he had noticed something.

"...It seems someone has tried to enter Hasse's monastery; I sense a slight disturbance in the protection field surrounding it. I imagine you can feel it as well, since you added your mana to the protection magic," Ferdinand explained.

It seemed that we could both sense people attacking the monastery—him because he had built it with creation magic, and me because I had poured my mana into the protection feystone.

"Come with me, Rozemyne," Ferdinand said as he headed to the hidden room beside his bed. I was a bit confused by his response. If people were attacking Hasse's monastery, surely it made sense to go there as soon as possible.

"Ferdinand, are we not going to Hasse?"

"I did not feel any significant interference. It would be wiser to investigate matters first," he said as he opened the door.

I rushed in after him. This was my first time entering his hidden room in ages—that is, excluding all the times I'd come here to be lectured.

Ferdinand picked out an octagonal bowl made of dark wood from among a mess of tools on one table, then set it down on a shorter, much less cluttered table. The bowl had a yellow feystone in each of its corners, and the intricate designs carved into the wood made it clear that this was a magic tool.

He placed a hand over one of the feystones and poured mana into it, causing yellow light to stream through the carvings. The light split in two directions, moving around either side of the bowl and gradually connecting its feystones while the design's pattern emerged to form a complete magic circle, standing out against the dark

background. A second later, liquid started rising up from the bottom of the bowl, filling it steadily.

Ferdinand took out his schtappe and said “*spiegeln*” before tapping the water, which made an image rise onto its surface. It was Hasse’s monastery. I stood up and peered into the bowl, rather than sitting on the bench like usual. This magic tool was entirely like a security camera.

“...Ferdinand, can this thing see everywhere?”

“If only. It can only see buildings with protection feystones containing the user’s mana. In general, the archduke’s family uses it to protect their cities and the duchy. It is not an all-purpose spying tool.”

I’d assumed it could also be used for weirdo peeping, but apparently I was wrong. I sighed in relief, which immediately earned me a threatening smile from Ferdinand.

“What in the world were you thinking?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing at all. I think what’s happening at the monastery is a lot more important right now.”

In the picture, we could see a group of around ten men armed with farming tools trying to force their way into the monastery. They had probably been ordered to do so by the mayor, though he was nowhere to be seen. The men were all pretty young, and the realization that they had come to take Nora and the others back made me shiver in fear.

“Ferdinand, we must go and help the orphans at once.”

“There will be no need for that; I see no nobles among them. Just observe,” he replied.

The men aggressively grasped at the door with the intent to force it open, only to then pull their arms back with surprised expressions. They tried over and over again with the same result each time, making them look entirely like cats swiping at a toy. It was hard to even see them as attackers.

“...What in the world are they doing?” I asked.

“The barrier around the monastery has been strengthened to not allow those with ill intent inside. They no doubt experience blinding pain each time they touch the door. Trying again will not change this, but it seems they are slow on the uptake.”

I watched the image, all the while thinking that being able to change the security level at will made the barrier a lot more convenient than expected. Ferdinand took that time to teach me a bit about creation magic.

“The reason I built the monastery instead of Sylvester was so we could strengthen its barrier without the one around Ehrenfest being affected. Had the archduke made the monastery, the barriers around both it and the city would have been strengthened together. It is not

hard to imagine all of the issues this would have brought about.”

The barrier around Ehrenfest was apparently set to block magic attacks, while the one around the monastery had been strengthened to block those with ill intent. Ehrenfest having that same barrier would no doubt lead to problems like kids getting into fights with their parents, leaving the city to gather in the forest, and then not being able to get back in.

“That makes sense. You could laugh off being locked out of your home after a fight, but not being able to get back into the city at all would be pretty serious,” I said. A smile crept onto my face as I pictured Dad pacing at the gate after an argument, able to do his job but unable to come home. But that smile didn’t last long. “...And now they’re swinging their farm tools.”

Finally understanding that the doors couldn’t be opened by hand, the men raised their farming tools and swung down at them as hard as they could. In an instant, every single man was thrown back, and they ended up strewn across the ground in misshapen piles.

“It resembles the shield of wind you made to protect the carriage during Spring Prayer, does it not? The monastery’s barrier is made in a similar fashion.”

“That shield did a perfect job protecting Fran and Rosina. I’ll trust a wind shield any day.”

The men looked shocked at having been knocked back, but still tried charging again. The results were as you would expect—no matter how many times they tried, they couldn’t even scratch the monastery’s door. They were only hurting themselves, and over time their blows grew weaker and they steadily looked more exhausted. The men grimaced up at the monastery as if seeing some kind of uncanny monster, then eventually retreated one by one.

“It appears that the barrier is functioning as intended,” Ferdinand murmured, looking like a scientist analyzing test results as he wrote some notes on a wooden board. “I suppose we could reduce its strength a little.”

But that idea terrified me. “I don’t think so. The barrier’s staying as is, and don’t change it without telling me! Now, we need to go make sure everyone is safe,” I said, but Ferdinand instantly shot me down without even looking up from his board.

“One wrong move now and the mayor may be eliminated like Wolf was,” he said quietly.

I froze mid-step, having already started leaving the room. Wolf was the former head of the ink guild who had one day died out of nowhere, and while I tended to forget he ever existed due to never having met him, his death served as a concrete example of how little nobles thought of commoners. Wolf had underground connections

with nobles, and had been silenced by being murdered the moment Ferdinand and Karstedt started investigating him.

And here Ferdinand was, warning me that the mayor could be murdered just as spontaneously if we moved as openly as we had before. I was sure that I understood how little nobles cared for the lives of commoners now, but hearing Ferdinand say it outright made my heart skip a beat. Hasse's mayor was no friend of mine, but I didn't want him dead or anything. At the very least, I would feel guilty if my actions led to him being killed.

"...Right. Lives are important, after all."

"Indeed. I would like to capture him alive, as I imagine there is much he can offer us in the way of evidence," Ferdinand said. It seemed that it wasn't the mayor's life he cared about, but rather the information he could provide.

That kind of thinking made Ferdinand perfectly suited to politics, in my opinion. He wasn't constantly moved by emotions like I was, nor would he mess things up by going crazy over books like I did. We were different on a fundamental level, and that just made me sigh; no matter how hard I tried to act like a noble, I would never fully become one myself. At the end of the day, I was just a commoner in fancy clothes.

"You will wait until the scheduled day to visit them. I imagine this has taught you that they will be safe from attackers inside."

There were three whole days before my next scheduled visit, and while I was more than a little impatient, I wasn't going to let them go to waste. I had Wilma determine what the orphanage would need for the winter preparations, and asked Fran to work out what my chambers would need. Meanwhile, Gil and Lutz determined how much handiwork could be done based on how much we had managed to do last year, then ordered the proper number of wooden boards from Ingo and the appropriate amount of ink from the ink workshop.

I had received an ordonnanz from Rihyarda instructing me to visit the castle so that I could have my winter clothing prepared, and Benno sent word that he wanted the chefs back to open the Italian restaurant. He also expressed his enthusiasm for me to sell my salting-out techniques to the Wax Guild, since he wanted to use the animal fat candles that didn't stink from last year.

In the midst of all that, Monika came to my chambers from the orphanage with a bundle wrapped in cloth. A guard at the gate leading to the lower city had apparently been handed a letter, and it was standard practice for those in the orphanage to take such deliveries to the temple's noble section for them. But despite calling it a letter, what Monika actually had was a wooden board.

“Lady Rozemyne, the sender said that they knew the former High Bishop was no longer in the temple, but asked for this to be delivered to him anyway. The gate guard didn’t know what to do with a letter addressed to the deceased, so I thought I would bring it straight to you.”

“Yes, this is the first letter we’ve been sent specifically addressed to the *former* High Bishop.”

As the current High Bishop, I would sometimes get letters of introduction from those requesting favors. These were usually sent by farmers and merchants heading for Ehrenfest’s market, so it was rare for us to get a letter right after the market had ended. And while we had received several letters addressed to the current High Bishop, this was the first to be specifically addressed to the former one. Perhaps news that the High Bishop had changed was spreading outside the city as well.

Only someone who knew that the High Bishop had changed but didn’t know the old High Bishop had died would send a letter like this. That ruled out those in the Noble’s Quarter, but outside the city, there were probably only a few who knew about his death.

“Shall we send the letter to his family in the Noble’s Quarter?” Monika asked.

I slowly shook my head. That might have been ideal under normal circumstances, but the former High Bishop didn’t have anyone for the letter to go to. His older sister—the mother of the archduke—was locked up with no outside communication permitted, and while the former High Bishop still had family on his father’s side, the head of the house had changed and they weren’t on good terms either. In fact, the current head had declared that Bezewanst was unbaptized and not a member of their family in any capacity—according to Ferdinand, anyway.

“I think our only option is to handle the letter ourselves. We shall do what we always do. Please inform the messenger to come again tomorrow for a response.”

“As you wish,” Monika said before leaving the room.

Once she was gone, I unwrapped the cloth so that I could look over the letter—that is, the wooden board. The writing was scrawled out in shaky letters that made it clear the sender wasn’t a very experienced writer.

Surprisingly enough, it was from the mayor of Hasse himself.

As Ferdinand had guessed, the mayor didn’t know that Bezewanst was already dead. His letter listed off complaint after complaint: “Do something about the monastery.” “Your subordinates are being despots.” “They stole the orphans I was contracted to sell to Lord Kantna the scholar.” I had known the mayor was a small fry, but this

was honestly so pathetic that I found myself at a total loss for words. All I could do was sigh.

“Fran, let us visit Ferdinand.”

At that, we went to see Ferdinand, with me carrying the board that served as crucial evidence of the mayor’s noble connections.

“Ferdinand, this letter arrived today. How shall we reply?” I asked, handing him the board. He glared at the poorly scribbled letters as he read, then made the same exhausted expression I had.

“...We need only reply that the former High Bishop has died. What we do from there depends on how he reacts. Assuming he does not move against us, we might find it best to let him fester; he likely wields no power that could threaten us,” Ferdinand said, deciding to base his final decision on the mayor’s future behavior and what might happen at Spring Prayer.

“Spring Prayer? Not the Harvest Festival?”

“Cities built on agriculture depend on divine protection for a healthy harvest; they might manage to scrape by for a few years without it, but the land would steadily become more barren. Will he prioritize relations with the High Bishop who can help his city, or earning small change from corrupted nobles? The choice is his,” Ferdinand said, waving his hand dismissively. “Should he choose poorly, the farmers and citizens who consequently lose their harvest shall rise up and remove him on their own. More importantly, I see that he has gone out of his way to name his noble ally. I suggest we investigate him first.”

“Good luck with that,” I said, leaving the board with Ferdinand and returning to my chambers to write a response to Hasse’s mayor.

Or rather, I wrote one under Fran’s supervision. He made sure to explain using all the usual noble euphemisms that the former High Bishop was dead, and that the mayor would have to decide in what direction to take his life now. I just hoped he would be able to parse the language.

A New Task and Winter Preparations

I gave my reply to Hasse's messenger. The city was only half a day away, so it was likely that the mayor would read it before I returned to the monastery the day after tomorrow. I was hoping he would understand the situation and settle down, but how he was actually going to react was anyone's guess.

"Ferdinand, is it truly wise to leave him be?" I asked.

"As it stands, we have no better option. It would be easy enough to eliminate him, but we must consider what would follow," Ferdinand explained. As nobles, we could quite easily use our authority to arrest a mere commoner mayor and literally have his head roll, but considering the state that Hasse was in, it would be unreasonable for us to execute the mayor and do nothing else.

"But still, isn't it best to eliminate an evil villain like him as soon as possible?"

"Rozemyne, why do you refer to him as 'evil'?"

"Well, he's selling orphans, bribing scholars, and seems to have been exploiting the old High Bishop's power. That seems like a lot of bad stuff..." I said, counting each reason off on my fingers. But Ferdinand simply raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"None of those are particularly bad, and they are certainly not evil," he replied, catching me completely off guard. I blinked in surprise, trying to understand what I had just heard, and we both looked at each other in confusion.

"The mayor earns the right of ownership over the orphans by taking care of them, so whether he sells them or not is entirely up to him," Ferdinand continued. "And giving nobles money and gifts to earn their favor is just a matter of course. Do you not remember Benno giving me gifts when we first met? It is only natural to use what you have to secure good relations."

Orphans were literally owned by those who looked after them, and it was so normal to bribe nobles that it didn't even count as doing something bad. I cradled my head, taken aback by this huge contrast in what we saw as common sense.

"...Wait. So what did the mayor do wrong?"

"What else but disobeying my orders, and standing up unpermitted to protest our decision?" Ferdinand replied. According to him, selling orphans and exhibiting a certain degree of corruption was

fine as long as it benefited the city—in fact, doing these things even made him a good mayor. The people of Hasse would put their full support behind him if the money made from selling the orphans helped the city.

“Hasse totals one thousand people when the neighboring farming villages gather to live in its winter mansion, and it is only natural that they would be prioritized above a number of orphans. If we use our power to destroy a mayor battling to protect his city, we will earn the ire of all the townsfolk,” Ferdinand said.

My heart thumped painfully. I had never thought about it that way before. “So, um, basically... we’re the bad guys from Hasse’s perspective?”

“At the moment, yes. We took the orphans they were planning to sell to nobles by force, put them in a monastery that the townspeople cannot enter, and are prioritizing these orphans over the taxpaying citizens,” he explained.

Never in the world had I expected that saving orphans from being sold into slavery would be perceived as wrong by others. I stood there, shocked, as Ferdinand continued with an unfazed expression.

“Unlike before when you earned all of your own money as an apprentice blue shrine maiden, you are now living off the taxes of your citizens as the daughter of the archduke. Is it any wonder why you might be expected to prioritize taking care of these taxpayers over orphans?”

Since I needed individuals without jobs to start working for the new printing industry, the temple’s orphanage had been very convenient for me. That was why I was planning to spread the industry by building new orphanages across the duchy, and presumably why the archduke had given me his permission to do so. But never did I consider that I would be actively harming the lives of normal citizens.

“The archduke gave you permission to do this because he determined that, by giving official work to orphans previously outside of the labor pool, you would be increasing the number of taxpaying citizens to draw wealth from. He was not simply acting out of compassion,” Ferdinand said.

A chill ran down my spine. I was being forced to confront the flaws in my narrow-minded worldview and carefree attitude. It felt like another fundamental part of me was being torn apart and forced to change, which kind of made me want to cry.

“...I did not expect that we would have such fundamentally different understandings of evil,” Ferdinand said. “This insect will no doubt prove to be a productive learning experience for you. I hereby instruct you to create an opposing faction to the mayor, expand it, and

then isolate him politically.”

“...Excuse me?”

“I am telling you to produce a successor to the mayor so that Hasse may continue to function without him. If you can acquire an obedient pawn who will obey our every whim, eliminating the current mayor will cause no problems whatsoever. Do your best. Given that we will almost certainly be executing him regardless, we may as well exploit him to his fullest while we still can.”

Ferdinand spoke casually, but I was overcome with terror. My teeth were chattering in genuine fear as I contemplated the task I had just been given—plotting to destroy the life of another person. I may have gone nuts over books in the past and taken actions that ultimately put a huge burden on others, but I had never actively schemed against someone before. I had been raised to believe that such actions were wrong, and that they were something I must never do.

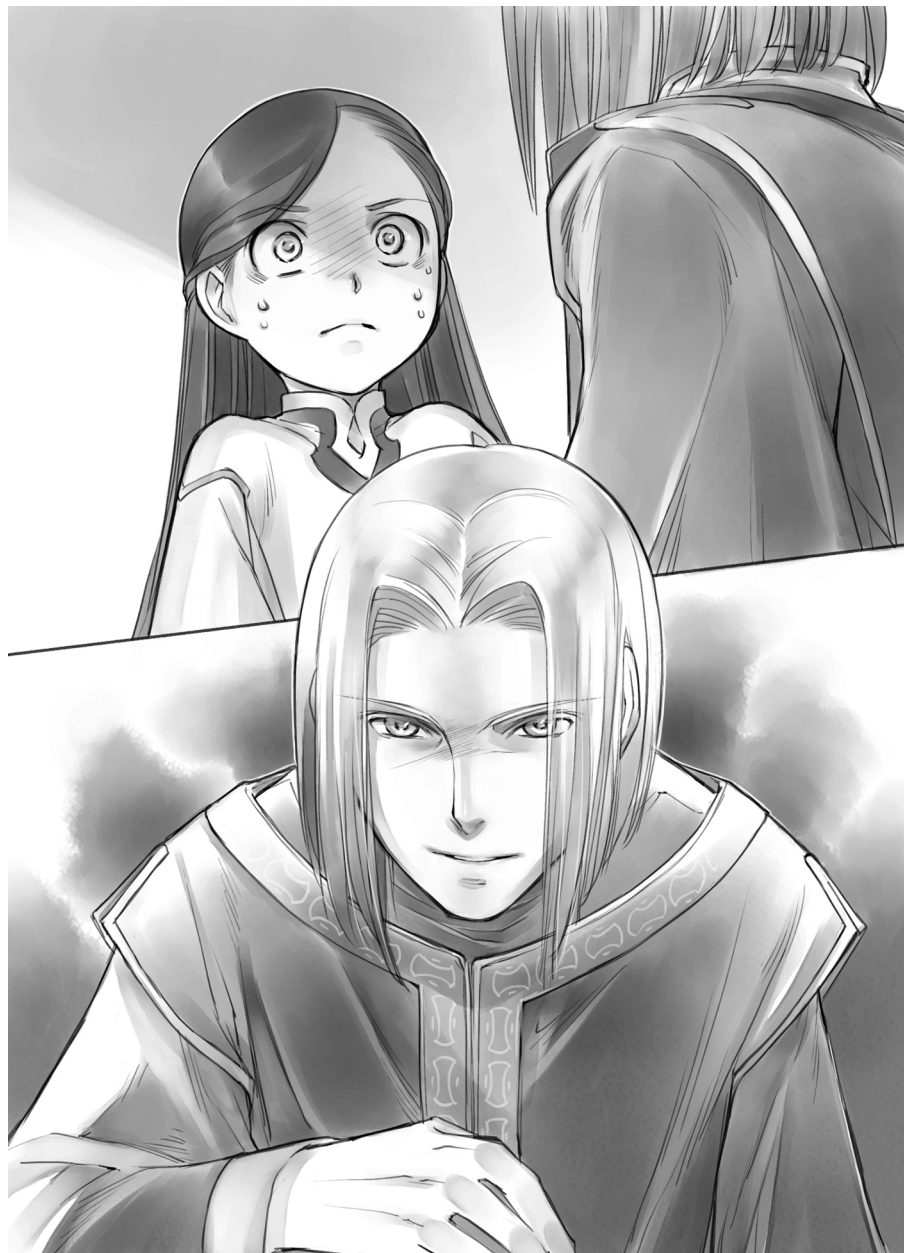
...I'm scared. I don't want to do this. I can't do this. No way.

I shook my head, trembling as I shrunk back in fear. But Ferdinand just gave my head a light flick as though trying to console a self-centered child.

“Rozemyne, if you do not handle this situation properly, the orphans in the monastery will not be able to go to the forest. That will prevent them from working in the workshop, and ultimately lead to them becoming burdens who can do nothing more than consume divine gifts. They will be ostracized not only by Hasse, but by the others in the orphanage as well. You do not wish to steal them away from their home, only to put them in a place where they will be shunned by all, do you?”

“But I don't know how to plot and deceive people...” I protested as best I could, but Ferdinand just knelt down to make eye contact with me.

“There is a first time for everything. I shall teach you how,” he said, breaking into a smile so poisonously sweet that I could feel the venom flowing into me. It was a sensation that made me tense up and grit my teeth.



That night, I was so stricken by Ferdinand's poison that I could hardly sleep. And when it came time to go to the castle the next day, my exhaustion was weighing me down just as much as the fear was.

I needed to be measured soon so that the clothes could be ordered and finished before winter, and it was so urgent that Rihyarda had sent me three separate ordonnanz yesterday. Ferdinand had caved under her pressure, so ultimately I was going to be dragged to the castle against my will. I felt so sick that I just wanted to rest, but they weren't going to let that happen.

Curse Ferdinand and his brutally high standards...

While I was there, I planned to retrieve Hugo as well. I couldn't foresee there being any issues with that since it was past the date we had agreed on anyway.

"Gil, we shall be going to the castle today. Inform Lutz that I will be returning with Hugo."

"As you wish. We will have the picture books finished soon, so please cheer up."

"Thank you, Gil. I hope that you continue growing up to be a good, honest person."

Gil's innocent, sincere smile healed my heart; it couldn't have been more different from the fake, poisonous smile of a certain someone. All of my attendants really were so cute.

"Rozemyne, is something wrong? You do not look well," Ferdinand said.

"I didn't get any sleep because I was up all night agonizing over the fact I have to plot someone's downfall." *And whose fault do you think that is?* I added on the inside, fixing Ferdinand with a glare as he blinked in surprise.

"With such a frail heart, you will never survive as the archduke's daughter. Am I wrong?"

"This might be a beginner-level task to you, Ferdinand, but to me it is one of the toughest problems I've faced. I don't think I'll ever sleep again by the time I've finished this."

"Something this trivial would give you insomnia? Hm... You truly are weak, Rozemyne."

I knew that I was weak, both physically and psychologically, so I simply nodded. Ferdinand let out a sigh, then lowered his eyes in thought for a moment.

"...I suppose there is no point thinking about this now. Let us depart."

I headed to the castle in my Pandabus, now used to the slight smirk on Norbert's face whenever he came out to greet us.

“I shall inform the Aub about the chefs, as you will be too busy to do so yourself,” Ferdinand said, blatantly lying with a self-assured smile on his face before flourishing his cape and striding off. He was definitely just running away from Rihyarda.

“Lady Rozemyne, welcome home. The seamstresses are already here,” Rihyarda said when I arrived, rushing me to meet them in the parlor.

The room was filled with piles of warm-looking cloth, plus a bunch of extravagant furs. This was my first time getting to pick the materials for my clothes, and while I knew I should have been excited about that, my mood didn’t improve in the least.

“This will be both your and Lord Wilfried’s first time participating in winter socializing. We must carefully consider what you are going to wear,” she said, clearly enthusiastic to be involved in dressing a girl after years of dressing exclusively boys. She had apparently already ordered several winter outfits for me alongside Elvira and Florencia. “We ordered them to match your summer measurements, but children grow fast so we’ll be wanting your newer measurements.”

Well, I don’t grow very much, but sure...

Ferdinand’s theory was that my need to keep my body filled with mana at all times was making it hard for me to grow. I wanted to believe that I had grown at least a little lately since I had been eating a lot more and now had more opportunities to use my mana.

...And the measurements showed that I had in fact grown a little. Though it was barely anything compared to other kids my age.

“What kind of outfit would you like, milady? This is one that Lord Wilfried is going to wear. I suggest we get you something that looks just like it,” Rihyarda said, showing me a wooden board with the design for one of Wilfried’s outfits drawn on it as she pointed out various colors and types of cloth.

I knew it was heartwarming to see a brother and sister in matching outfits, but I didn’t feel too enthusiastic about being in that situation myself. Regardless, it appeared that Rihyarda had already emotionally settled on the colors and cloth. All that was left was the design, which she had also narrowed down to a few candidates.

“Lady Rozemyne, which of these two do you prefer?” she asked.

I really didn’t care too much about clothes myself, and would be fine with pretty much anything that made other people happy as long as it wasn’t embarrassing for me to wear.

“I would like this one, please,” I said, pointing to one at random. I had assumed that would settle the matter, but Rihyarda wouldn’t let me go until I also ordered a set of underclothes and shoes to go along with it. With nothing to lose, I took this opportunity to also order

some clothes and carpets to make life in the temple easier. That would be a big help since getting clothes for winter last year had been such an arduous task.

“Rihyarda, I must be going soon to discuss the chefs with Sylvester.”

“The chefs you brought with you have been enormously popular in the castle, milady. I am told that, despite everyone wanting to know the recipes, Lord Sylvester’s lips are remaining as tight as can be.”

It seemed Hugo was steadily getting more popular in the castle. I smiled as Rihyarda complained about him not letting everyone share the delicious food, feeling a bit proud.

“Sylvester used his own money to buy the recipes; it’s no surprise that he wouldn’t teach them to others so readily. I imagine he wants to surprise the nobles during winter.”

“Lord Sylvester invited me for lunch one day, and I could hardly believe what I was tasting. Seems like I have a bright winter to look forward to,” Rihyarda replied.

Well... I'll be taking that chef home with me today. Sorry! I apologized to Rihyarda internally before asking her to set up a meeting with Sylvester for me.

“I imagine that will be difficult on such short notice.”

“Lord Ferdinand has surely made arrangements for me. Perhaps try asking Sylvester.”

“As you wish, milady. It may be some time before I return. Please read this in the meantime, if you would.” Rihyarda took out a book and set it down in front of me. I could feel a beaming smile instantly spread across my face; all of my doom and gloom was being pushed out of sight and mind as the joy of reading washed over me.

“Thank you, Rihyarda.”

“Be a good girl and wait for me, now.”

I responded with a nod and a smile before picking up the book and immediately starting to read. It was a book about magic that Ferdinand had prepared for me, containing descriptions of feystone colors and how they related to the gods. It seemed that the colors were connected to the divine colors of the gods, and particular-colored feystones worked better with certain types of magic. For example, it said that when using magic related to the Goddess of Water or her subordinates, it was most mana-efficient to use green feystones.

It was a relatively easy book for me to read since I already knew the names of the gods and their relationships from the bible, but given that all of the Eternal Five and their subordinates were being mentioned at once, I could imagine that someone who started learning with this book would get lost almost immediately. It was probably

meant for adults; the phrasing was complex at times, and the sentences were often long and winding. On top of all that, the writing style itself was antiquated and hard to read, using lots of older words. There were illustrations here and there, but they didn't have anything to do with the book's contents, so I got the feeling they didn't really matter.

...If a book like this is being used to teach nobles essential information, then I feel like the picture books I'm making will actually be in high demand, I thought, continuing to read the book with newfound confidence in getting a ton of winter sales.

At some point, Rihyarda tapped my shoulder and informed me that a meeting had been arranged for teatime at fifth bell. I decided to continue reading in the meantime—in all honesty, I would have much rather skipped the meeting entirely and stayed with my book.

When fifth bell rang, I started making my way to the front of the castle's main building where Sylvester's office was. Wilfried approached us along the way, having seemingly been caught by Lamprecht partway through one of his usual escape attempts.

"Rozemyne! I didn't know you were back at the castle."

"Good day to you, Wilfried."

"Where're you going?"

"...A fine question. Yes, a fine question indeed," I said, deliberately trying to avoid answering. Wilfried already thought it was unfair that only I got to speak with Sylvester, so I didn't want to say that I was on my way to have tea with him.

But Rihyarda answered for me. "We are going to the break room on the main building's second floor, Lord Wilfried."

"...Why does Father only ever give you any attention?" Wilfried grumbled, biting his lip and glaring at me with anger in his eyes. "No fair! You dummy! I hate you, Rozemyne!"

I normally would have kept a blank expression and ignored him, but I was so emotionally troubled by the task Ferdinand had given me that I couldn't let Wilfried's whining slide this time. Him skipping out on his studies and doing whatever he wanted reminded me of my early days as Myne when I had only cared about myself, which was annoying enough on its own without him insulting me too.

"You are the 'dummy' here, Wilfried. You have the opportunity to freely read books, and yet you spend that time running away from your studies and being a burden to all those around you. How is it unfair that Sylvester is treating me differently? You are only getting what you deserve. Now, hurry up and learn to read already, if you would be so kind. I am waiting ever so impatiently for the opportunity to study, and you are denying me that. If you weren't years behind in learning to read, I would be studying right now instead of getting

blood on my hands for Ferdinand!”

That last part wasn't Wilfried's fault at all, but I was so mad that I had to say it. I didn't want to hear him complaining at me ever again.

Wilfried widened his deep-green eyes and looked at me in total shock, having never dreamed that I would talk back to him. His guard Lamprecht was looking equally wide-eyed, and Rihyarda was blinking rapidly.

“Wh-Wh... What gives you the right to talk to me like that?!” Wilfried stammered.

“Please remember that you are a coward who spends his time fleeing from the work expected of him as the archduke's son. If you don't want me pointing out your failures, then I would suggest you dedicate yourself to improving as a person.”

I was especially angry because things were getting worse for me by the day, while Wilfried just pranced about doing whatever he wanted despite also being one of the archduke's children. I wanted to yell at him to try doing what Ferdinand had just told me to do.

“Lady Rozemyne! Please, contain yourself!” Damuel shouted, shaking me by the shoulders and bringing me back to my senses. It seemed that, in my anger, I had Crushed Wilfried a bit. Leaving now would probably be for the best; it wasn't a good idea for us to stay face-to-face.

“As I am busy with a mountain of work, I will be taking my leave now.” I turned on my heel and walked off, which was fine, but the archduke's castle was needlessly big and the distance between my room and Sylvester's office was absurd. Due in part to my lack of sleep, I ended up getting out of breath along the way.

Cornelius's face clouded over as he saw my walking pace slow down. “Rihyarda, Lady Rozemyne doesn't seem to be feeling well,” he said. Cornelius always called me “Lady Rozemyne” when guarding me as a knight in the archduke's castle, but his expression was that of a worried older brother.

Rihyarda peered at my face, then picked me up and resumed walking. That wasn't good. Now my head was spinning.

“Milady, please take care not to pass out before the meeting.”

“Sorry. Things would be a lot easier if I could just drive a small Pandabus through the castle.”

“Why, I say we suggest that to Lord Sylvester.”

When we arrived at the break room, tea had already started. Sylvester was drinking alongside his retainers and Ferdinand.

“You're late, Rozemyne,” he said.

“This room is so far from hers that she almost collapsed along the way. May I suggest that you give her permission to ride her highbeast in the castle?” Rihyarda requested on my behalf.

Sylvester crossed his arms in thought. “Won’t the wings hit the walls and all that?”

“Milady’s highbeast has no wings, and she can change its size at will. It won’t be a bother to anyone.”

At that, Sylvester’s deep-green eyes shone with curiosity. “Lemme see it. I’ve never seen a highbeast without wings before. If it looks funny enough, I’ll give her permission.”

“Okay. I would be riding him alone in the castle, so he would be about this big...” I said, taking out my feystone and making a single person-sized Pandabus. And since that single person was me, he was about as small as a rideable children’s toy. I got inside and drove around the room at a walking pace.

“That’s a highbeast?! The heck is that?! Bwahahaha! Now that’s funny! I’d expect nothing less from you, Rozemyne—you always think of stuff nobody else can,” Sylvester choked out, guffawing with laughter as he pointed at Lessy. “Alright, I’ll keep my promise. Feel free to use it all throughout the castle.”

“No... No! Sylvester!” Ferdinand exclaimed.

“What, Ferdinand? Better this than having attendants and knights carry her around at all times, right?”

With the archduke on my side, I had nothing to fear. I let out a sigh of relief, having been permitted to use Lessy in the castle and its estates, and took my seat. As I sipped my tea, Sylvester glanced my way.

“So, what did you want to talk about?”

“I imagine Ferdinand has already informed you, but I am here to take Hugo back,” I said.

Sylvester shot his head to the side to look at Ferdinand. “...You didn’t mention this, Ferdinand.”

“Wait, really? What in the world did he talk to you about, then?”

“There are more pressing matters than the chefs. And Sylvester, you should know that the lending period that was agreed upon is now over. There should be no issue with her taking him home,” Ferdinand said, tapping a finger against his temple.

While that was true for me, it seemed Sylvester did in fact have several problems with that. “No way. The food’s finally getting real good. Let him stay a bit longer.”

“No. I can’t give you any more time; we won’t be able to open the Italian restaurant without him.”

As Sylvester and I glared at each other, Ferdinand waved his hand. “Summon the chef. We can let him decide.”

That might have been a reasonable idea if not for the fact that no commoner chef would be able to defy the archduke’s orders. Hugo wouldn’t be able to speak his mind at all.

That was no doubt why he had a stony expression on his paling face when he was brought into the room. Chefs were commoner servants, and would normally never visit a noble's room like this. And as one could tell from Fran disliking the idea of me teaching Ella recipes directly, it was rare for commoners to leave the ground floor.

"You have served me well," Sylvester said to the kneeling Hugo, who was facing the floor in a way that hid his expression from view. "What would you say to me offering you a job at the castle? I would be glad to have you as a court chef."

"My lord, I..." Hugo began, hesitantly trailing off rather than jumping for joy—a clear sign that he wanted to refuse.

"Sylvester, we are just borrowing Hugo from the Gilberta Company, and it is absolutely necessary that we return him to them. Once he has returned, you will be free to invite him back as much as you please. Hopefully you would give him time to train a successor first, but either way, please do not try to steal him away here and now," I said.

While still wearing his serious archduke expression, Sylvester gave a light shrug. "What a shame. I'll have to visit that eatery again sometime, then."

"I shall await your patronage, my lord," Hugo said reverently.

I decided to take Hugo to the carriages that were leaving the castle, and so exited the room after we had said our farewells to the archduke. As soon as we were out in the hall, Hugo let out a quiet sigh.

"Thank you, Lady Rozemyne. I have a partner I wish to wed, and it would have been problematic for me to become a court chef so suddenly."

Hugo had been throwing taues along with the other single people back at last year's Star Festival, but it seemed he had finally found a girl of his own. That explained why he wanted to go back to the lower city so much; there weren't any easy methods for commoners to pass messages between the lower city and the Noble's Quarter, so it would have been even harder than a normal long-distance relationship.

"So, will you move to the Noble's Quarter once you get married, Hugo?"

"...It depends on her, but if the stars align, I would like to be a court chef after the next Star Festival," Hugo murmured with a grin.

Opening the Italian Restaurant

My head was fuzzy after what seemed like an endless series of restless nights. More people would be executed alongside Hasse's mayor than necessary unless I could successfully create an opposing faction to isolate him, and the sleep I was losing from repeated nightmares of Ferdinand's smile weren't helping things at all. His warning that I needed to succeed here to save lives was real and I knew it.

The day I could visit Hasse's orphanage had finally arrived. I had boxes of bedding and food loaded into my Pandabus, as well as several stencil templates, then let Fran, Gil, Nicola, and Brigitte inside before heading off. Ferdinand and Damuel had looked at Lessy with the same uncomfortable expressions as usual, but knew by now that complaining wouldn't change anything.

"We welcome you, Lady Rozemyne." The priests and gray shrine maidens knelt to welcome me, mimicked by the four newbies who repeated the same greeting. My attendants used this time to unload our goods, and I put away the Pandabus once they were done.

I turned to survey the room, and the first thing I noticed was how great Nora and Marthe looked. The exhaustion that had been clear on their faces the last time I saw them was completely gone. Thore and Rick looked a lot better, too.

"I see that the attack by the city folk did not cause any problems. You and Marthe are looking splendid, Nora," I said.

Nora looked up, then asked "May I be permitted to speak?" in a stiff, stammering tone. She was clearly learning how to talk politely.

I nodded, and she smiled in relief.

"Those people couldn't do anything to us. They couldn't even get inside. And when they swung their farming tools and stuff around, they just got blown away. I couldn't believe it, but it was a huge relief. Thank you, Lady Rozemyne. I'm glad I came here."

She had seemingly been taught to call me "Lady Rozemyne" over the past few days. It was such a stark contrast to her casual commoner speech that it was almost kind of funny.

Thore, having listened to what Nora said, looked up as well. "Same here. I, uh... I was real glad to see that they won't be able to take Nora away from me no matter what. And we get food every day here. Everyone's saying you're the reason everyone in the orphanage

gets to eat. You're small, Lady Rozemyne, but now I know you're somethin' else," he said, speaking quickly out of excitement and as casually as ever. But his blue eyes lacked the sharp glare from before; he was now looking at me with respect and gratitude.

The gray priests kneeling next to him and Nora were aghast at seeing how frankly the two orphans were speaking to me, but the fact they were now addressing me by a title showed that they were working hard to communicate properly, especially considering how antagonistic they had been just a few days prior.

"Rick, I imagine that living in the monastery is very different from what you are used to, but have you been managing? I am sure the mayor afforded you all more freedom than you have here."

"I care about safety more than freedom. I'm just glad to see Marthe smiling again. Thanks, Lady Rozemyne." Rick's gaze softened as he looked at Marthe, and she returned a small smile.

Seeing that, all of my remaining doubt that taking them from the mayor was the right idea vanished. I wanted to do whatever I could to protect that smile. My aim was to find a solution that would work for both the citizens and the orphans, but I didn't know how to go about isolating the mayor and orchestrating his downfall... nor did I want to.

My stomach hurts...

The day after visiting the orphans, I had a meeting scheduled with the Gilberta Company. The Italian restaurant was going to be opened now that Hugo and the others were back, and we needed to discuss the date, the menu, and when I would be visiting. I would also be signing a contract to sell the salting-out method to the Wax Guild, with Benno as my representative.

"You do not look very well, Lady Rozemyne. Shall I cancel today's meeting for you?" Fran asked, peering at my face with worry after bringing me my breakfast. I must have looked pretty sick for him to think canceling the meeting was a good idea, but I just shook my head.

"I'll go to the meeting. I want to see Lutz."

"In that case, I will bring a book for you to read until the time comes. Please rest while you can."

"I thank you ever so much, Fran."

I spent the morning in bed with Fran looking after me, reading as I waited for the scheduled meeting time. Reading always brought peace to my heart, since my head would be too full of words to think about all the ills of the world ailing me.

Third bell eventually rang, and I headed to the orphanage director's chambers for the meeting.

"Careful!" Brigitte shouted, quickly grabbing my shoulders and

pulling me back.

I blinked in surprise, and it was only then that I noticed the thick pillar right in front of me. She had pulled me back before I could slam right into it.

"I... I thank you ever so much, Brigitte."

"I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw you wavering right toward the pillar," she said. "I believe it would be best to postpone today's meeting."

I looked so awful that even my guard felt compelled to interject and suggest I change my plans. But even so, I wanted to see Lutz.

As I bit my lip, Fran got on his knees in front of me. "Lady Rozemyne, may I be permitted to carry you? If you insist on attending this meeting, I ask that you at least allow me to take you there."

"Please do."

And so Fran started carrying me to the orphanage director's chambers. It was impossible to ignore how bad of a state I was in due to sleep deprivation; I would have fallen asleep on the way to the meeting had nightmarish visions of Ferdinand's poisonous smile not flashed through my mind each time I closed my eyes, causing a searing, stress-induced pain to shoot through my stomach. I couldn't sleep no matter how much I wanted to.

By the time we arrived at the orphanage director's chambers, the Gilberta Company was already there. Lutz, Benno, and Mark were kneeling in wait, and once we had exchanged greetings, I invited them to the second floor. They looked up, and then all immediately furrowed their brows.

What might they be thinking? I wondered.

Before we could start talking business, Fran suggested we move to the hidden room. That was strange, since he usually told me not to go there until we had settled all the important matters. I looked up at him in surprise as he put a hand on my back and gently pushed me toward the door, and with a pained expression he murmured, "I apologize for not being strong enough to help you."

"Did something happen? You look awful," Lutz said as soon as we were inside, putting his hands on my cheeks and looking at my forehead. His narrowed green eyes made it clear that he wouldn't let me leave until I'd told him everything.

"Lutz..." I said, warm tears of relief welling up in my eyes and streaming down my cheeks at the knowledge that there existed someone who would listen to and accept me no matter what. I clung to him and wept pitifully, unable to hold it in any longer.

"Ferdinand gave me a new mission, and it's really, really hard. I don't want to do it but I haven't got a choice, and just thinking about it makes me feel sick," I choked out, before telling them about the

letter I had received after taking the orphans, the task Ferdinand had given me, my fear of plotting to kill someone, and how Ferdinand's poisonous smile was keeping me up at night.

I finished explaining everything that Ferdinand had told me—that I needed to prioritize the citizens over the orphans, isolate Hasse's mayor so that he could be safely executed, and so on—only to get two completely different reactions: Lutz angrily shouted “No way could you ever manage something like that!” while Benno and Mark widened their eyes and said “He sure is being soft.”

“What do you mean ‘soft’?! He isn't being soft on me at all! I feel like I'm about to die!” I yelled.

“Calm down. That's not what I meant,” Benno said, waving a dismissive hand. “The High Priest does seem to be showing you some unusual kindness, but I meant he's being soft on Hasse. That mayor was dead the moment he disobeyed a noble's order, and Hasse's citizens gave up their lives as soon as they got together to attack the monastery. Under normal circumstances, that whole city would be burned to the ground with everyone in it. You know that, right?”

“...Wait, what? Everyone in the city would be burned alive?” I asked, eyes wide open in complete disbelief. I could understand the mayor being executed, but something that drastic just didn't make sense to me.

“The monastery is an ivory building that the archduke arranged to be built at his adopted daughter's request. Attacking it is the same as attacking the archduke's family, and don't tell me you don't know what happens to people who attack the archduke's family.”

I swallowed hard. Count Bindewald, a noble from another duchy, had been imprisoned under extreme charges after attacking me. A bunch of other crimes he had committed were also apparently exposed by searching his memory, but the crucial element that sealed his fate was him attacking the archduke's daughter.

A crime deemed grave enough to get a noble imprisoned would of course lead to serious consequences for offending commoners as well. The people of Hasse had attacked the monastery with ill intent to get Nora and the other orphans back, but given that they had just attacked the building, hadn't even managed to scratch the doors, and only ended up hurting themselves, I hadn't really thought much of it. But if that counted as an attack on the archduke's family, then Benno was right—it wouldn't be strange for Hasse's citizens to be executed at any given moment.

“Hasse was doomed the moment their attack was noticed; they're going to get punished one way or another. The only reason Hasse is still on the map is because you and the High Priest didn't report it to the archduke.”

In conclusion, Benno was saying that Ferdinand had spared Hasse so that it could serve as a learning experience for me, and that it would have already been burned down had he not had the idea to give me my mission. The thought alone sent shivers down my spine.

“The High Priest said it’d be a good learning experience, didn’t he? Honestly, I think he’s right on the money,” Benno said flatly. “Hasse’s people messed up so bad that they wouldn’t be able to complain if their whole city got burned down, so it doesn’t matter if you fail. Just give it your best shot. Feeding the opposition and antagonizing rivals is something even we merchants do, and if you’re gonna survive as the archduke’s daughter, you’re gonna have to learn to do this sooner or later. No need to feel guilty about punishing criminals.”

But I just couldn’t see things that way. I fell silent, at which point Mark gave a wry smile and narrowed his eyes a little in thought.

“I believe Master Benno is correct here. When the man meant to teach him died, he had no choice but to develop his skills as a merchant through trial and error. If you have the opportunity to learn under a teacher, I advise you make the most of it while you can.”

They were both right. Now that I was the archduke’s daughter, I would need to learn how to plot against others in order to survive. But actually executing these plots terrified me.

“You’re making it sound so simple, but just thinking about plotting the downfall of others makes me sick. I just... I just can’t do it,” I said, shaking my head as I clung to Lutz.

“Then just change the way you’re thinking about it,” Lutz interjected, patting me on the head. I looked up at him, wide-eyed, and he gave a teasing smile. “You’re feeling sick ’cause you’re framing it as you plotting the mayor’s downfall. How about you think of it as saving Hasse from being burned to the ground by the archduke? So you’re not plotting a downfall, you’re saving people. After all, the High Bishop of Ehrenfest is a real-deal saint who can give true blessings.”

Everything clicked into place. It was like I could truly see at last. I just needed to look at the situation not as plotting the mayor’s downfall, but as saving the people of Hasse from the execution they would all be receiving otherwise. Thinking about it like that made me feel so much more optimistic.

“The High Priest told you to breed opposition to the mayor, isolate him, and then stabilize the town, right? If you can manage to do all that, this whole mess will end with only the mayor being executed. Let’s think about what we can do to save as many lives as possible.”

“Okay!” I exclaimed. “I can’t imagine the citizens like me at all

since I stole their orphans away, so I think we should start by fixing that..." I began, only for Benno to pull Lutz and me apart.

"Hold it. Hasse isn't going anywhere for now, so just let this rest. We can think about it once we've opened the Italian restaurant."

"...You're going to help too, Benno?"

"Not like I can turn down a request from the archduke's adopted daughter. Doing that might just get me executed," Benno said with a teasing grin. "But in return, hold off on thinking about it for a while. You need to announce the Italian restaurant's opening first, and this isn't a face you can show in public. Get yourself a good night's sleep."

"Lady Rozemyne, you are not particularly dexterous, so handling two things at the same time will likely lead to them both ending in failure. Let us first pour all of our energy into the Italian restaurant, so that we may help you afterward," Mark said with a bright smile.

I had people who were willing to help me think through an impossible task, and who were there to worry about my health. I let out a sigh of relief, like I was exhaling all the pressure that had been weighing down my heart.

"I think I'll finally be able to sleep again now. I can already feel myself getting tired."

"Save the sleeping for when the meeting's over, idiot. Once we have this wax contract done, we'll be talking about the Italian restaurant," Benno said. "Let's handle this outside with Fran."

And so we exited the hidden room. Fran immediately looked at me and, upon seeing how much better I looked, gave a relieved smile.

We finished the wax contract just as planned, then moved on to discussing the Italian restaurant. The opening would take place following a big meeting in the Merchant's Guild so as to draw in a bunch of Ehrenfest's big store owners, and most of the invitations that Benno had sent out had come back with positive replies.

"What might you be planning for the menu?" I asked.

"I would think that something seasonal would be wise, but..." Benno trailed off mid-sentence, putting on a polite smile. In other words, he wanted me to think up a menu for him.

"Given that you aren't serving the archduke this time, might I suggest a less elaborate menu?"

"And why is that?"

"Because people adjust to what they're given. By leaving your most impressive dishes for later, you can surprise them even more when they come a second time," I replied, starting to think up a menu while considering what fruits and vegetables were in season.

A quality appetizer might be steamed bird mille-feuille layered with sliced pome and turnip-esque vegetables, garnished with meryl oil and herbs after being marinated in wine and salt, then finished

with a decorative application of dressing on top.

We could also make some minestrone that looked like normal vegetable soup. Customers would probably be surprised by the consommé flavor, and given that everyone in the city was used to eating soup that tasted exclusively like salt, we didn't even need to go out of our way to make double consommé.

The first main dish could be spaghetti in white sauce with a ton of seasonal mushrooms. White sauce had earned a lot of points with all the nobles, especially the archduke, so I could trust that it would be well received.

As for the second main dish, I was considering pork cutlet. Pig meat was easier to get this time of year than beef so it would be very reasonable to make, plus we could swap the meat out for chicken when we wanted to save money. Fried food was pretty lavish here since it used a lot of expensive oil, so we would instead marinate the breast meat in salt and wine to make it tender and delicious.

Incidentally, Karstedt liked pork cutlet more than anything else.

Dessert could be Leise's newest fruit pound cake, plus a birne pie.

As I ran through the menu, I saw Benno and Mark writing everything down in their diptychs. Once that had all been decided, we moved on to what we would be doing the day of the opening.

"Am I right to assume that you will be okay to come and announce the opening, Lady Rozemyne? We can send a carriage to the temple once fourth bell rings," Benno said. I inferred from the subtext that he didn't want me getting there too early, so I went ahead and wrote "After fourth bell. Go slowly" on my diptych.

"Certainly. There won't be much for me to do, after all, since I shall be returning to the temple right after the announcement."

"We ask only that you take proper care of yourself."

Or, in other words: "You look sick. Make sure you're better by the time the day comes."

And so, my meeting with the Gilberta Company came to a close.

I still had the same task ahead of me, but my spirits were high now that I'd changed the way I saw it. That night, I slept well for the first time in days. I woke up feeling great, and spent the days leading up to the opening of the Italian restaurant relaxing, prioritizing my recovery above all else.

First came writing the contents for a new picture book, then preparing for the upcoming Harvest Festival, then finally writing a letter to Elvira saying that my artist needed art utensils and would provide one illustration for free if she was provided for.

...Ferdinand told me not to print Wilma's illustrations, but he didn't say anything about her drawing more! I'm not breaking my promise at all.

Heh heh.

I started lunch early on the day of the Italian restaurant opening, not wanting my stomach to grumble during the announcement and embarrass me in front of everyone. Once lunch was done, Monika dressed me in clothes fit for an archnoble girl, complementing the look with a fancy hair stick that we would generally use for ceremonies.

Soon after fourth bell rang, Fran came in wearing his commoner clothes and informed me that the carriage had arrived.

“I shall be off, then.”

“We await your prompt return, Lady Rozemyne,” my other attendants responded.

Upon arriving at the Italian restaurant, I passed through the door and into the entrance hall. There I found about twenty men on their knees, each the owner of a large store. The fact they were kneeling put us at eye level, and I could see that they were all looking at me in surprise and shock—likely either surprised to see I was actually this young, or starting to doubt I really was the High Bishop since I wasn’t wearing the white robes.

“I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the fruitful days of Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind,” the guildmaster said as he knelt in front of the crowd.

I poured a bit of mana into my ring and responded with a blessing. “May Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind bless this meeting.”

At that, the mana overflowing from my ring turned into the yellow light of a blessing. Everyone here had likely received a blessing before when visiting a noble’s estate in the Noble’s Quarter, so all traces of doubt instantly faded from the men’s faces, replaced with stiff frowns and tense looks.

“I am Rozemyne, she who was assigned to be the High Bishop by Aub Ehrenfest.”

From there, I went on to announce that I had contributed money toward Benno’s Italian restaurant after he helped me make a workshop to save the temple’s orphanage, and that I was in the process of expanding printing throughout the duchy at the archduke’s orders.

“Benno and Gustav have been assisting me in spreading the printing business,” I continued with a smile. “It may come to pass that I ask for your help in the future, and I would appreciate your cooperation when the time comes.”

I could feel sharp, money-hungry looks being sent my way almost instantly. Benno, the guildmaster, his son, and even Frieda were all shooting me ravenous glares, like they were looking over every inch of me for somewhere to bite. With the tense atmosphere of merchants

clawing for money making me feel somewhat nostalgic, I started explaining how the restaurant's "introductions only" system worked.

"This restaurant requires an introduction to enter, and we only serve a chosen few customers. As I, the High Bishop and daughter of the archduke, will also be visiting this restaurant at times, only those who can truly be trusted may eat here," I said, preventing anyone from complaining about the introduction system by firmly establishing that I was the one responsible for it.

The store owners all nodded obediently, knowing how terrifying nobles could be.

"As the provider of the recipes served here, I personally guarantee that the food is on par with what nobles eat. Please see for yourself."

At that, waiters immediately started pushing carts of food into the room. The appetizers were the same as what I had eaten for lunch. I looked over the wide-eyed store owners as they watched the plates being distributed and knew that they were already hooked.

"I imagine that my presence will distract from the food, so I shall take my leave now. I look forward to your future patronage."

With the announcement concluded, Fran and I departed at once, with Mark and Benno seeing us off as we returned to the temple by carriage.

"Man, it went great. The store owners couldn't believe what they were tasting, and they all fell over themselves to butter Master Benno up for an opportunity to help the High Bishop," Lutz reported with a grin the next day.

We had spent over a year preparing the Italian restaurant, so nothing made me happier than hearing that its opening had gone well. Hopefully that success would continue.

"The customers loved it, but, well..." Benno trailed off, giving Lutz and me a conflicted smile. We both looked at him, wondering whether there had been some other problem.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"Seems like Hugo wants to become a court chef as soon as he can. He got an invitation from the archduke, apparently. Said we should expect him to leave as soon as he's done training his replacement."

"He certainly did receive a direct invitation from the archduke. But are you sure he's in that much of a rush? I thought he wanted to wait until after the Star Festival... Oh!"

I could still picture Hugo grinning about how he wanted to hold off on becoming a court chef because he had a girl he wanted to marry, and then that picture crumbled to dust. I searched for words, not wanting to say that he had been broken up with, but it wasn't hard for Benno to guess what I was thinking.

“...Yeah, that’s probably what happened. What he said to me was: ‘I’m gonna become a court chef as soon as I’ve trained someone else. I’m done with women. Cooking is all I need.’”

Sounds like she broke up with Hugo... I can’t say I’m surprised; long-distance relationships are tough.

Discussing How to Improve Hasse

With the Italian restaurant business taken care of, I wanted to focus on taking care of my mission in Hasse. And since the Gilberta Company was already in my hidden room, now was the perfect time to ask them for help.

“Where do you all think I should start?” I asked. “Now that I know Hasse could be burned down at any moment, I’m having a bit of a hard time focusing on anything else.”

Benno lowered his dark-red eyes for a moment while rubbing his chin. “The biggest problem with Hasse is that the people there just don’t know enough about nobles; they don’t understand how grave the sin they’ve committed is. Fixing that should be your first step.”

People living in the city of Ehrenfest knew not to complain even if a noble killed their daughter, so they certainly wouldn’t dare to act over some orphans who didn’t matter much to them being taken away. And never in a million years would they be dumb enough to attack a building owned by the archduke.

“But just to be clear here—you messed up too. If the mayor there already had a contract to sell those orphans to scholars, then this little incident’s going to get him a lot of complaints from nobles. His connections are as good as dead.”

“Assuming he was selling them to support the city over the winter, that was money he could not afford to lose,” Mark added. “For commoners, whether or not one has connections with nobles can be the difference between life and death.”

Seeing the situation from a new perspective, I couldn’t help but empathize with Hasse a bit more. Maybe I really was a brutal tyrant for stealing the orphans away from them.

“I can probably only tell all this because I’ve been going to the temple’s orphanage a lot, but...” Lutz prefaced, before going on to explain how much the orphans raised in the temple differed from other orphans.

Here, kids born to gray shrine maidens were raised in the temple, along with those who lost their parents before they were baptized. But orphanages outside the temple were part of an independent community—a community that the orphans were still a part of, only they were raised by the city authorities rather than their parents. For this reason, they were also seen as the community’s property—they

were fed on the city's dime, then forced to work to make that money back. If need be, they could even be sold wholesale to an outsider.

"I heard that from Ferdinand. He said the mayor has the right to sell the orphans since he took them in and raised them. In the temple, that's what the High Bishop does."

Which meant the temple didn't care what I did with the temple orphanages. I could lavish the orphans with unearned comforts, or I could work them to the bone to save some money—either way Ferdinand wouldn't be able to do anything but complain. The final say went to me, the High Bishop. That was precisely why Ferdinand had been largely unable to do anything back when he served beneath the previous High Bishop.

"Plus," Lutz continued, "the temple orphans end up as gray priests and shrine maidens, but they stay in the orphanage even after growing up, right? Well, the men in Hasse are given fields once they've grown up."

In the temple, some orphans were sold as servants to nobles and others became the attendants of blue priests and shrine maidens, but most did indeed stay in the orphanage.

In Hasse, however, orphans were given independence as citizens when they came of age. But women were given such small plots of land that it was impossible for them to survive alone, forcing them to find a marriage partner. Men without parents were considered a great catch since the woman's family could add him to their own without losing their daughter, but since women without parents had no funds for a dowry, they tended to end up in miserable marriages. According to Lutz, they either ended up as the second wives of older men who needed to be cared for, or trapped in abusive marriages.

"Everywhere in the world, people without support end up suffering," Benno spat out, shaking his head as if symbolically shaking off his painful past. "You're the archduke's daughter so, diplomatically speaking, you're well within your rights to take the orphans. But if you think of the orphans as products, this basically looks like a noble using their authority to steal away merchandise someone invested a lot into. They can't complain publicly, but you can be sure they'll hold a grudge. You need to tie up the loose ends here so they don't come back to bite you later."

Benno went on to say that I needed to use my position as the archduke's daughter to talk to the scholar, cancel the contract, and then pay the mayor what the orphans were worth to stop him and the city from resenting me. I wrote it all down on my diptych; this was much more practical and understandable advice than anything Ferdinand had given me.

"Also, don't just agonize over these things on your own. If you're

not sure about something, ask the High Priest. Tell him the conclusions you're coming to and he'll give you concrete advice and corrections, no doubt about it. He did say he'd teach you, didn't he?"

I looked up from my diptych, my gaze shifting from Benno to Lutz to Mark, then nodded slowly.

"On top of all that, you've been stuck inside for so much of your life that you're lacking a lot of common sense. Plus, the common sense you do have is coming from a number of clashing lifestyles—your experiences as a merchant, a shrine maiden, and now a noble are all fighting for dominance, which has made your perspective on things weird in literally everyone else's eyes. If you don't make it clear what your thought process is, then the High Priest isn't going to understand what's going on in your head."

Much like everyone else, Ferdinand couldn't grasp what I was thinking on his own. He only knew the life of a noble, so Benno was telling me to use my words to bridge that gap. But no way could we have a conversation like that using confusing noble euphemisms; we'd need to have a one-on-one in a hidden room.

"Either way, you should check how much time you have to do something about Hasse. Ask if you can save the rest of the city by only having the mayor executed, and whether that's what he's expecting from you. Talk to the scholar who tried to buy the orphans, pay the mayor for them ahead of time, and then talk to the townspeople themselves once that's all done."

I gave an affirmative nod, writing everything that Benno was saying down on my diptych.

"And one more thing—ask him if you can spread a rumor using merchants," he continued.

"What kind of rumor?"

"Let's see here... A rumor that the merciful, compassionate High Bishop is grieving over Hasse, as an attack on the monastery has put the entire city at risk and made it likely that even those not involved will be executed," Benno said.

Mark gave a smile. "That will not only emphasize your merciful nature, but also make people aware of both the mayor's stupidity and how terrifying nobles truly are. The news that outsiders are distancing themselves from the city will worry them, and they will stress over who is going to take responsibility for the attack. We shall stir fear and discontent, establishing a deep-set and ultimately long-lasting fear of nobles among the populace."

Strangely enough, thinking up what rumors to spread seemed to have made Mark even livelier than usual.

"If we spread this rumor to the owners of big stores and warn caravans leaving through the east gate to be careful around Hasse,

every merchant in the city's gonna know by the end of the day. If there's one thing merchants have, it's a crazy good information network," Lutz added, placing a contemplative hand on his chin. "Pretty sure they'll all believe it too, since they just met you and Master Benno in the Italian restaurant. Anything the Gilberta Company says about the High Bishop's gonna have a lot of credibility."

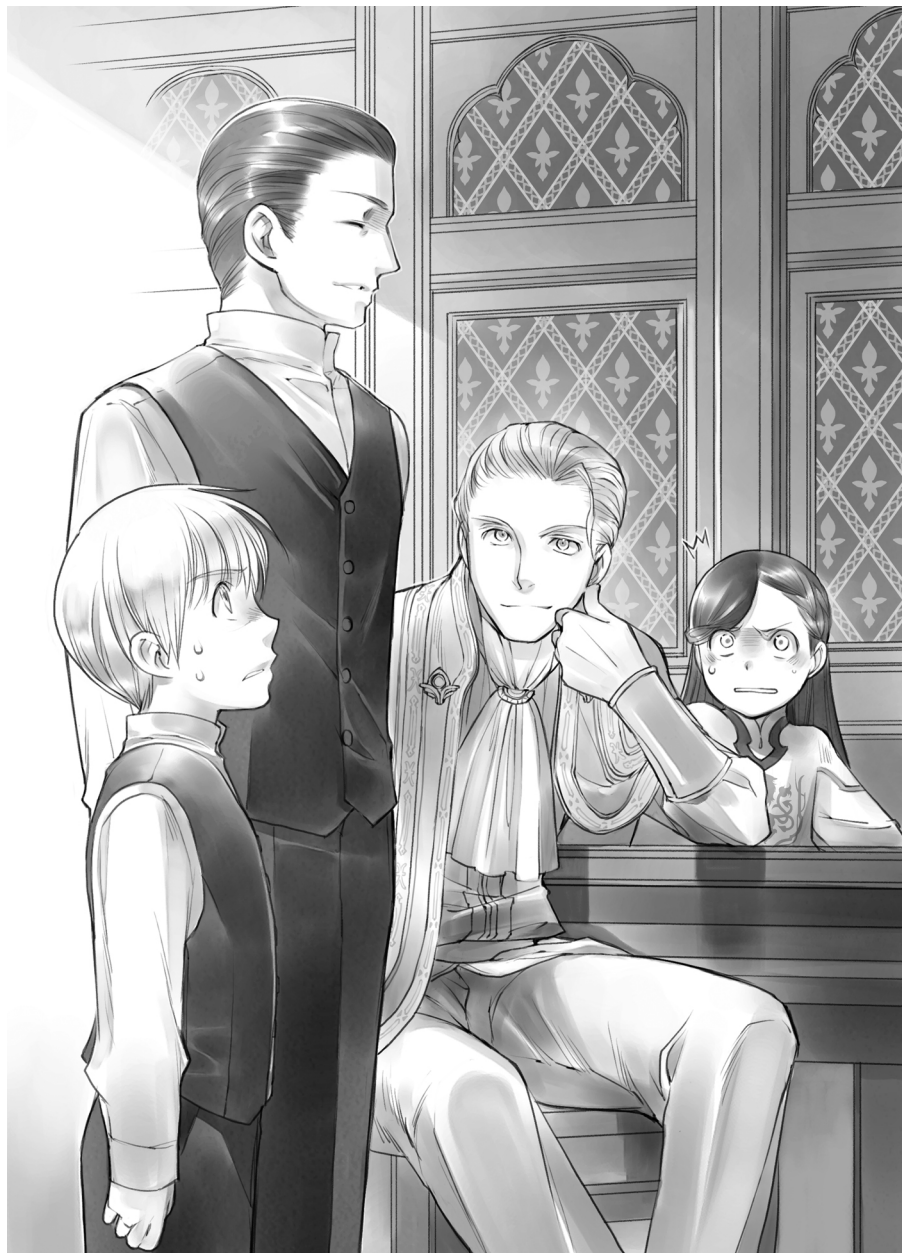
I hadn't expected that my connections to store owners would prove so valuable so quickly. My eyes started to shine with excitement, but Benno raised a hand to calm me down.

"Lutz is right, and spreading these rumors will be easy. The problem is, they'll also make it public that Hasse attacked the monastery. Not sure whether the High Priest wants that information getting out."

"Please contact us as soon as the High Priest gives you an answer; battles of information such as this are my specialty. That mayor deserves neither mercy nor compassion, and this is an opportunity for me to destroy him using everything I have," Mark said. His eyes were gleaming with life, and a dark smile had spread across his face.

He was normally such a kind butler that I recoiled a bit in surprise, and as I looked at him with wide-open eyes, Benno laughed and muttered that Mark had been offended by how rude the mayor had been to them.

Oh, right. They did say that the mayor and scholars had treated them terribly. I guess this is the perfect opportunity for Mark to get revenge.



With the discussion about Hasse now settled, we moved on to talking about this year's winter preparations.

"I would like to do the orphanage's winter preparations alongside the Gilberta Company's. Would that be okay?"

"That's fine with us, but don't you guys have to prepare the orphanage for winter way early?" Benno asked, stroking his chin and thinking back to last year.

I shook my head. "Last year we had to keep things hidden from the blue priests and the High Bishop, and we just barely finished before the Harvest Festival ended. But I'm the High Bishop this year, so we don't have to worry about the dates like before. We can do it all at the same time you do."

Mark nodded and started writing that down on his diptych. "Those of the Rozemyne Workshop are all hard workers, and their help will more than make up for the extra labor this requires. If you can make a list of what you need, adapted to the current population of the orphanage, then we can make arrangements at once." He was as speedy and competent as ever, and I was sure that everything would be fine if we left it to him.

"Thank you. Also, please send a carriage to the monastery around the time of the Harvest Festival. The priests in Hasse will be staying in the temple over the winter as well, and we would like to bring them back here before winter preparations actually begin. We'll get the soldiers to guard you again."

"...We'll be busy then, but sure," Benno responded once he'd thought things over. "Work on the monastery and the Italian restaurant has settled down now, so things are pretty calm compared to how busy I've been lately."

He definitely seemed less overworked than before. It seemed that the peak of his busyness had finally passed.

With the results of my talk with the Gilberta Company recorded on my diptych, I made a list of everything I needed to do. Chief among them was discussing things with Ferdinand.

"May we hold our discussion elsewhere today?" I asked, looking toward the hidden room. Ferdinand lowered his gaze for a moment, then stood up and said "Very well" before opening the door.

Once we were inside, I sat on my usual bench and looked over my list.

"You look much better than Fran's report suggested," Ferdinand said, his brow slightly furrowed. Fran had apparently been so worried about me that he'd reported it to Ferdinand.

"He wasn't exaggerating—I really hadn't been able to sleep over

the past few days, and I looked so sick that even my guards were suggesting I cancel plans. I only managed to start sleeping again after meeting with the Gilberta Company, talking the situation over, and getting a new perspective on things.”

“...I see,” Ferdinand muttered without much energy.

Honestly, he looked a lot sicker than I did. Ferdinand used the same potions he often made me drink on himself as well, forcing himself to stay active at all times. He was always of the opinion that any weakness you showed would be exploited by others, so it was rare for him to look so visibly off.

“It seems to me that you’re the one who’s exhausted right now, Ferdinand.”

“That is because I have heard no end of complaints about how I am being too harsh on you.”

He had apparently discussed my exhaustion with others, only to have Karstedt and Sylvester yell at him for going way too far. Even Fran had complained, albeit indirectly.

“They gave me the unreasonable request to cheer you up with something other than books, but now that you’ve recovered, I imagine that won’t be necessary anymore,” Ferdinand continued dismissively, averting his eyes. It appeared that he hadn’t been able to think of anything besides books that I would like.

Ferdinand was normally capable of doing anything with a cool and unfazed expression, but here he was at the end of his rope. It was a rare sight indeed.

Ohoho... Far be it from me to miss this opportunity to have some fun.

“Oh, it will be necessary—it’s your mission to cheer me up. Go on. Do it.”

“I have determined it to be absolutely unnecessary. Though if you have some particular ideas in mind, report them to me at once,” he said with a glare.

I sharply pursed my lips in response, before moving on to say that Benno and Mark had explained to me what a dangerous position Hasse was in, and that Lutz had told me how the temple orphanage differed from the ones in cities.

“Hold on, are you telling me you did not understand the significance of the monastery being attacked?” Ferdinand asked, completely taken aback.

“I mean, it was just a building... They didn’t even scratch it. Like, I knew that we needed to protect the orphans, but I didn’t think that an attack on the monastery would count as sedition,” I said, floundering as I tried to explain what I had just gone over with the Gilberta Company. “Benno told me this earlier, but what we see as common sense is just too different.”

“What do you mean?”

“Benno said I have the common sense of poor people, merchants, shrine maidens, and nobles all clashing in my head, but... most of my perspective is actually based on my old life. Before I came here.”

Ferdinand had used a magic tool to see my memories of my life as Urano, so I imagined that he'd understand my culture was completely unlike the culture in this world.

“It's been about three years since I woke up here and started living in this world,” I continued, “but in that time I've lived as a soldier's daughter, the upcoming apprentice of a merchant, and then an actual apprentice blue shrine maiden. Now I'm an archnoble and the archduke's adopted daughter, but I don't have a full grasp on noble culture. And to make things even more complicated, my overall perspective and mindset isn't anything like that of anyone born in this world.”

“...I do not fully understand. What are you trying to say?” Ferdinand asked. He had spent his entire life in noble society, so it made sense that he wouldn't immediately grasp the concept of there being different perspectives and values. I paused for a moment, trying to think of a good example, then remembered Ferdinand grimacing at the orphans in the monastery.

“Ferdinand, think about what would happen if you were suddenly banished to the lower city and forced to live there. You grimaced when you saw the orphans eating without using cutlery, right? Well, you would have to look around you and copy them, all while being made to think that your manners and everything you know is wrong.”

Thinking back to the orphans, Ferdinand frowned with displeasure.

“You'd think about how dirty it was and how much you hated having to copy those around you, wondering why they acted like that at all and why you were the odd one out. But no matter how you felt, you'd have to start eating food with your hands and adapting your speech and lifestyle to match theirs. That's what I had to do to survive in the lower city, at least.”

“...That certainly would be a challenge. Good on you for surviving,” Ferdinand said, his praise carrying more weight than any compliment I had received from him before. But I just shook my head with a smile.

“It's still a challenge, and I'm not out of the woods yet. It's gotten easier for me to live as my environment has improved, but my culture is still entirely different from the culture of nobles. I don't have the same common sense that you do.”

“You seemed to be living well in your past life, judging from those memories. Were you not an archnoble there as well?” Ferdinand

asked. To my surprise, his experience exploring my memories had made him think I was an archnoble there. Though, to be fair, I did seem to recall comparing life in Japan to everyone living like a noble.

“There wasn’t a rigid class structure. There were a lot of small differences if you looked hard enough, like between a big store owner and a small stand owner, but there were no nobles where I lived.”

“That is... certainly something. It seems that I will need to rethink your education plan from the ground up,” Ferdinand said with a sigh, placing a hand on his forehead. He had apparently designed my education under the assumption that I already knew at least some of what an average archnoble girl would know. That explained why he had been so brutal from the start.

“So, what conclusion did you come to regarding Hasse? If the matter is beyond you, I can handle it myself.”

“No, that’s okay! I already thought up a plan with Benno and the others,” I announced, holding up the list.

“...Hard to believe those are the words of someone who was losing sleep over this. For what purpose did I endure being yelled at, then?” he muttered bitterly.

“I’m sorry. But it’s true that I didn’t want to do this, and that I was losing sleep over it.”

As I started listing out what Benno and Mark had told me, Ferdinand leaned forward with great interest. “I see. This is a solution that only someone with deep connections in the lower city could come up with. Interesting... I will allow you to use the merchants to spread rumors; do just as they suggested. As for discussing matters with Kantna in the Noble’s Quarter, I shall accompany you so as to teach you how to deal with nobles. This will be somewhat of a nonstandard method, but you shall grow stronger by learning from a variety of sources.”

It appeared that Ferdinand really intended to get as much learning value from this Hasse mess as he could.

“Um, Ferdinand... Don’t you think it would be wise to teach Wilfried this stuff as well? Given that I’m adopted, Wilfried would become the archduke even if I married him, right?”

“That is indeed the case,” Ferdinand sighed. “As you know all too well by now, Wilfried greatly resembles Sylvester, both in appearance and personality. This means it will be necessary to train someone who can serve as his right-hand man—or, in this case, right-hand woman. Such is the end goal of your education. Now that you are the archduke’s child, you must become someone who can cover for the next archduke’s weaknesses.”

In the end, Ferdinand was telling me to live exactly as he had. I couldn’t say for certain whether he had worked so hard to support

Sylvester because he was trying to earn his place in Ehrenfest as a half-brother scorned by his other mother, or he was just trying to meet the expectations placed on him by those around him. But one thing I knew for sure was that I didn't want him pushing his values on me.

"I don't believe that's right, Ferdinand."

"What?"

"Wilfried and Sylvester may resemble one another, but they are not the same person. At the current moment in time, it is impossible to say whether Wilfried will grow to be capable of putting on a mature archduke act like Sylvester does."

Ferdinand frowned and jutted his chin up a little, urging me to continue.

"I think it makes sense for a future archduke to receive a strict education, then have his weaknesses compensated for by those around him. But what need is there to make a kid who runs from his studies and abandons his responsibilities an archduke? He has siblings, so I think the position of archduke should go to someone who's actually trying to learn and grow."

As the archduke's adopted daughter, I didn't mind doing my best to support a future archduke who worked hard each day and dedicated themselves to their studies. I could even respect someone like Sylvester, since he knew to take his archduke duties seriously. But Wilfried was just a spoiled brat; his sense of responsibility was weaker than that of the lower city children taking on apprentice work after their baptism. I wasn't about to respect some dumb kid who spent all his time running away, and if Ferdinand expected me to train just to back him up then he had another thing coming.

"I think you should focus on educating Wilfried rather than me, seeing as he is related to Sylvester by blood." And given that Ferdinand was of roughly the same status as Wilfried, he'd be able to tie him to a chair and force him to endure an intense education, traumatizing him more by the day. There was no doubt in my mind that such extreme measures were the only way to make Wilfried realize just how soft everyone had been on him his entire life.

But Ferdinand slowly shook his head. "Unfortunately, that won't be possible."

"...Why not?"

"I despise foolish layabouts," Ferdinand answered firmly, his expression deadly serious. "Whenever I see Wilfried and his pathetic attempts at escapism, I wish for nothing more than to freeze his heart and push him into the valley of despair. I once mentioned this to Sylvester, and he begged me to stay as far away from his son as I could."

I could understand why Sylvester wouldn't want a walking trauma

dispenser anywhere near his beloved son. I really could. But future archdukes needed a strict education. I started thinking about what I could do to get Ferdinand to agree to teach Wilfried, only to see him flash me the same venomous smile that had kept me up at night.

“But in stark contrast to Wilfried, you are very much worth teaching. You provide results, and your point of view is always as unexpected as it is intriguing. I am filled with the desire to have you do all sorts of things.”

“N-No thanks. I want to do the bare minimum and spend as much time as possible reading books.”

“The bare minimum, hm...? Indeed. I am very interested in seeing where your infinite source of energy for books comes from. More than anything, I would like to dissect it.”

Th-This isn't right! He's supposed to be freezing Wilfried's heart, not mine!

As it turned out, whenever that terrifying smile filled with poison crept onto Ferdinand's face, it was a sign that he was in an exceptionally good mood. It was safe to say that he wouldn't be winning any children over to his side any time soon. I scooted down the bench to get as far away from him as I could, rubbing my arms in shivering fear.

...Ferdinand looks kindest when he has a robotic, deadpan expression on his face. His smile is the scariest thing about him!

Switching Places

“Welcome home, Lady Rozemyne,” Norbert said.

I had returned to the castle with Ferdinand, having been summoned by Sylvester to report on Hasse and the Harvest Festival. My plan was to read in my room until it was time for the meeting, while Ferdinand had some work he needed to take care of in his office here.

...He has work wherever he goes. Ferdinand sure loves work, huh?

“Brigitte, Damuel—please use this time to rest. You will need to accompany me back to the temple shortly, but I hope you enjoy the break nonetheless.”

“We thank you.”

When it came time for my meeting with Sylvester, Rihyarda took my book away. I exited the room with Cornelius and Angelica serving as my guards, and just as I started climbing down the stairs, Wilfried came into view.

Oh, it's Wilfried... I hope he doesn't bother me with any more dumb complaints.

Wilfried was probably under the impression that, as Sylvester's adopted daughter, I was invading his territory. We were siblings in name only, and, for all intents and purposes, we were still pretty much strangers. To him, it looked like I was receiving preferential treatment despite being adopted, so it was no surprise he would be frustrated. But still.

Trying to pretend that I hadn't seen him, my eyes moved on their own to get him out of view, but that didn't stop me from hearing his bitter voice. “Going to Father's room again...? No fair.”

He was grimacing, but I was the one who wanted to complain about this happening *again*. Holding back the urge to just completely ignore him and walk right by, I mulled things over. *I think the best thing to do here is make him understand that I'm not getting better treatment at all.*

“If you absolutely insist that this isn't fair, Wilfried, then why don't we try switching places for a day?” I asked, elegantly tilting my head and plastering on a smile to hide my frustration.

Wilfried likewise cocked his head. “Er... What do you mean?”

“I am on my way to report what I have been doing to Sylvester, after which the plan is for me to eat lunch and return to the temple.

But I suggest you go to the temple in my place and spend a day as the High Bishop,” I explained. This was an idea I had thought up on the spot, but it was actually a pretty good one in my opinion; he would understand the position he was in much better after experiencing my life in the temple.

Go forth, Wilfried. Go forth and have your heart frozen by Ferdinand.

“We can have the swap last from lunchtime today until lunchtime tomorrow, planning the day ahead during the first lunch and then discussing it together during the second. I will study in your place, Wilfried, and all you have to do is be the best High Bishop you can.”

“Ooh, Rozemyne! That’s a great idea!”

“Lord Wilfried! Lady Rozemyne!” Lamprecht shouted, wearing a serious expression as he interrupted our agreement. His charge, Wilfried, was excited to be leaving the castle, but as his guard and my older brother, Lamprecht was none too pleased. It was his job to stop us from doing exactly this kind of thing, which was respectable, but I wasn’t about to let him get in my way; I was one hundred percent done listening to Wilfried whine about things being unfair each and every time he saw me.

“Lamprecht, people who do not learn lessons from being told must learn from experience instead. Furthermore, Wilfried wants this himself.” *...Plus you’re the one who wanted to show him what a big gap there is between us, dear brother,* I added indirectly through a bright smile. If he wanted to stop this, he would have to stop Wilfried.

“I shall discuss this matter with Sylvester. If you go and get changed first, you should arrive after the boring part of the meeting is over,” I said, before bringing out my highbeast to get a move on.

“What the heck is that?!”

“My highbeast. Sylvester permitted me to ride him inside the main building since I would collapse from ill health otherwise.”

“I don’t even have a highbeast yet! It’s always you, Rozemyne! No fair!”

There he goes again... I held back my sigh and just started driving. “You would do well to get dressed soon; Sylvester is already waiting in his office.”

When I eventually arrived, it was already past time for the meeting to begin. Sylvester, Ferdinand, and Karstedt were already there, having cleared the room of their retainers—that is, their knights and attendants. I dismissed mine as well.

“You are late, Rozemyne.” Ferdinand chastised me the second I closed the door, so I explained the conversation I had just had with Wilfried, as well as my brilliant idea.

“At the very least, I would like Wilfried to understand how much of a slacker he is being, and how ridiculous it is for him to complain

to me, of all people. There wouldn't be an issue if he stopped going out of his way to complain to me; I would be more than happy to just avoid him entirely. But he just won't let up, and I can't promise to maintain my patience forever. I nearly Crushed him the other day."

"It is quite dangerous for someone defenseless to be hit by your unconstrained Crushing," Ferdinand observed, having once experienced it himself.

Sylvester's eyes widened. "But what's all this about sending him to the temple? You want him to spend a whole day with Ferdinand? That's way too cruel."

"Sylvester, what does that say about you making me spend *every* day with Ferdinand?" *If anything's not fair, it's that. Does he not feel bad for me being thrust into my own valley of despair, with Ferdinand piling load after load of unreasonable tasks on me?*

"You're the weirdo who actually managed to get close with Ferdinand," Sylvester fired back.

"...Wait just a second. *You*, the biggest weirdo I know, are treating *me* like a weirdo?!"

"What?! Are *you* calling *me* a weirdo?!"

Sylvester and I glared each other down, our intense staring contest only being broken when Karstedt interjected. "Now, now. Settle down. You're both weirdos." That seemed a bit excessive, but in any case, he then stroked his chin and gave me his support. "I understand your point, Rozemyne. Lamprecht has often mentioned that Lord Wilfried refuses to listen to anyone, so perhaps sending him to the temple will be good for him. Lamprecht has also gone to the temple on multiple occasions and is familiar with your attendants, so he will be more than capable of guarding Lord Wilfried throughout this."

Having secured Karstedt as my ally, I turned to look at Ferdinand. At this rate, all I needed was his support to win this battle. But when I looked up at him with hopeful eyes, he returned a cold gaze. "I do not care in the least about Wilfried. Hurry up and finish your report."

"...Fiiine."

As I was giving my report on Hasse, Wilfried finally arrived. The way he looked around the room curiously showed that this was his first time coming here.

"Wilfried, do you seriously intend to switch places with Rozemyne? Let me give you some fatherly advice: give it up."

Having been rejected by Sylvester the moment he entered the room, Wilfried pouted and frowned. I took a step forward and backed him up.

"Sylvester, this is what Wilfried truly wants. Please grant his wish."

"...Rozemyne." Wilfried looked my way with heartfelt gratitude,

completely oblivious to the fact that I was actually plotting his downfall. I honestly felt a little bad about tricking him so thoroughly, but I needed to develop a heart of stone to earn back my peace.

I looked up at Ferdinand. "You promised to cheer me up, Ferdinand. And it was Sylvester who ordered you to do that, was it not?"

Sylvester immediately grimaced, and upon seeing that, Ferdinand curved his lips into a grin. I could guess that he had realized he could use this situation to get revenge on Sylvester for the unreasonable task he had given him.

"If I can complete Sylvester's impossible task by looking after Wilfried in the temple for a day, I will gladly oblige," Ferdinand said, watching on with great satisfaction as Sylvester grimaced even harder. Ferdinand was the biggest key player in getting Wilfried into the temple for a day, and with him on my side, I could guarantee that Wilfried would have a *very* fulfilling day.

I gave a bright smile. "Now that Ferdinand has given his permission, I ask that you give yours as well, Sylvester. It is about time that Wilfried sees the orphanage, understands his position, and becomes aware of what he must do. Unless his education is corrected soon, he will forever be beyond redemption."

"...Ferdinand, did you teach her to do this? She's spitting poison with a smile on her face," Sylvester said with an exhausted expression, comparing us both.

Ferdinand and I exchanged eye contact. *...I mean, do you even have to ask? The answer should be obvious.*

"She has always been like this."

"His education made me like this."

But for some reason, Ferdinand and I gave different answers. *Strange*, I thought, just as an exasperated Sylvester waved his hand to drive us out the room.

"Enough already. I get it. If this is what you want, Wilfried, then you can change places with Rozemyne for a day. Just remember that I tried to stop you. The end."

"Wilfried, I suggest we discuss matters over lunch. I will need to give instructions to my temple attendants, and you will need clothes to wear at the temple," I explained, climbing upstairs in my single-person Pandabus. The two of us were returning to the northern building after being shooed out of Sylvester's office.

It was only once I had entered my room and gotten rid of my highbeast that I felt the strength leave my body.

"Are you alright, Lady Rozemyne?" Cornelius asked, peering at me with worry. He had been strangely overprotective ever since Wilfried

caused me to faceplant back at my baptism ceremony.

"I'm just a little tired. I'll be fine."

Wilfried demanded to ride Lessy in my place, then complained to me when the Pandabus didn't move. That was hardly my fault, though—we just had different mana. Dealing with him was especially tiring since there weren't any poorly behaved kids like him in the temple, but I couldn't let myself be exhausted. I still needed to give Fran instructions on what to do once he took Wilfried in.

"Rihyarda, I would like to write a letter. Please prepare a pen and paper."

"Milady, what in the world makes you think that sending Wilfried to the temple is a good idea?" Rihyarda asked worriedly as she fetched a pen and paper.

"I confess to not putting much thought into the matter. At the end of the day, I spend most of my time in the temple, so I would like to know how a normal child of the archduke lives."

At that, I started to think of what I needed to get Wilfried to understand over lunch. First was that he was going to the temple to work as the High Bishop, not play. Second was that he wasn't allowed to complain about how my attendants treated him.

"Wilfried, while you are in the temple you will not be the archduke's son, but the High Bishop. Please do your job properly. Furthermore, I will instruct my attendants to treat you as the High Bishop, so please do not expect them to be soft on you."

"You're the last person I want to hear that from. Unlike you, I'm not being spoiled," Wilfried said with a sincere pout. He seemed genuinely unaware that he was being spoiled.

"Then you will have no problem with my attendants treating you like normal."

"Of course." Wilfried agreed with his chest puffed out proudly, and it seemed like he actually meant it. Lamprecht, on the other hand, noticed the subtext behind what I was saying and gave me a worried look, but I ignored him with a smile.

"There are rooms for guards in the temple, but not for noble attendants. For that reason you will be taken care of exclusively by my attendants in the temple, and as there are both men and women there, you will not lack for anything. I will ask Lamprecht to accompany you as a guard; as my brother, he is used to visiting the temple. Damuel and Brigitte will also be there."

Wilfried's other retainers all made expressions of obvious relief at not having to go to the temple. Only Lamprecht still looked nervous. He had no doubt noticed long ago that I wasn't doing all this out of the kindness of my heart; he had a bad feeling about the whole situation, and good on him for being so sharp.

“Since we are switching places, I shall be using your chambers. All of your attendants seem to be men, so I ask that you permit Rihyarda to accompany me inside.”

“Yeah, sure,” Wilfried said with an excited smile.

A short while later, we had finished lunch. Rihyarda sent an ordonnanz to Damuel and Brigitte at my request, telling them when Wilfried would arrive. They were able to finish preparations in no time, so all I needed to do now was see them off to the temple.

“Ferdinand, please take care to inform Fran that he should treat Wilfried exactly as he would treat me. Here is a schedule for him. Lamprecht will be there to assist with your math, so I do not believe this will cause any interference with your work,” I said, handing Ferdinand a letter and suggesting that he use Lamprecht in my place.

Ferdinand glanced their way, then gave a poisonous smile. “Very well. Now then, Wilfried—it is time for your day as High Bishop to begin.”

I had no idea what was going on in Ferdinand’s head, but that smile was as terrifying as ever. I took a smooth step backward.

“I intended to travel exclusively by highbeast today, so we do not have a carriage prepared,” Ferdinand continued. “Wilfried, ride with Lamprecht. And now, we go!”

From there, Ferdinand drew forth his white lion, jumped on, then soared up into the sky. Lamprecht followed suit and summoned his own highbeast—a wolf with large wings. He hefted Wilfried up onto it, then spread its wings far apart before flying up into the sky.

“I must say, I’m not sure how I feel about you spending a night in a boy’s room...” Rihyarda muttered once they were gone.

“I would like to know all that I can about Wilfried’s daily life,” I replied, before following her to his room. She made sure it was in order, then called Wilfried’s head attendant to prepare the table for studying before the tutor was due to arrive.

“Oswald, you must get things ready sooner than this. Will Professor Moritz not be arriving soon?”

“Lord Wilfried always runs away, so it’s actually quite rare for his table to be prepared at all. I’m just glad that I get to do some attendant work for once.”

“What in the world are you saying? When he runs away, you must catch him and bring him back. Do not let his guards slack on their work,” Rihyarda chided with her eyebrows raised, having likely been taught something similar when raising Sylvester.

Oswald blandly shrugged his shoulders in response and got back to work preparing the table.

It wasn’t long before the tutor arrived. “May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the fruitful

days of Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind?” he asked.

“You may.”

“O Schutzaria, may my new student be blessed. It is a pleasure to meet you, milady. I am Professor Moritz, assigned to be your tutor. May your education proceed swiftly.”

I looked up at him, eager to begin learning. “What have you been teaching my dear brother Wilfried, might I ask?”

“He is currently practicing his letters.”

“My my! Are you saying he cannot even write the alphabet yet?! Should I take that to mean he is merely a math prodigy, with all his talent resting in numbers?” Rihyarda exclaimed. I had already known that Wilfried didn’t know how to write his letters yet, but it seemed Rihyarda was unaware of just how tragically uneducated he was. She strode right up to Moritz, getting directly in his face.

“...Er, no. He is still, uh... inexperienced, and...” Moritz’s voice grew weaker and weaker until he eventually trailed off completely.

Rihyarda’s eyes shot open, and she unleashed her own tremendous thunder on him. “Oswald! Professor Moritz! What in the world are you two doing?! Do you have any intention of raising Wilfried at all?! Everyone line up, right now!”

From that point on, nobody could stop Rihyarda; she gathered Wilfried’s attendants and his remaining guards, then started lecturing them all. The sheer extent of her anger told me that this lack of education bordered on abandonment, and could not possibly be worse. And while she shot down all of the excuses that the attendants and guards tried to make, there was still one clear, unifying cause for Wilfried’s current position. In summary: it was basically all Sylvester’s fault.

Sylvester had apparently obtained the position of archduke after battling with his older sister for it. But he hated the system that forced siblings to fight, and so he decreed that Wilfried would be his successor no matter what. Sylvester was no doubt trying to be kind and spare his son from what he hated so much himself, but that ended up being a big mistake.

Under normal circumstances, all children born to the archduke’s proper wives were equal in the line of succession, and the future archduke was selected based on who had the most mana and was most suited to the position. To that end, the attendants and teachers assigned to an archduke’s child would completely dedicate themselves to raising their charge. That only made sense given that serving the one who became the archduke would change their futures dramatically, bringing more honor to their family and all that. That was why Karstedt had put so much effort into catching the young Sylvester whenever he ran away, and why Rihyarda had scolded him

so severely. It was obvious that Sylvester would be forced to do what was necessary for his growth, no matter how little he appreciated it.

But Sylvester had already willed for Wilfried to be his successor. Who, then, would dedicate themselves to raising him? Scolding a child would obviously earn their ire, so it was much easier and safer to let him do as he wished and earn his favor. For this reason, nobody bothered to admonish him; all they did was shrug and smile away his bad behavior.

“Oswald, surely you know why one with archduke blood and archnoble status such as yourself was assigned to be Lord Wilfried’s head attendant?! It was so you could oppose his selfish behavior without being silenced by his status! And we went as far as to assign Lamprecht to guard him, too! What have you even been doing?!”

In his youth, Sylvester had been caught and forced to study whenever he ran away, while Wilfried was allowed to do whatever he wished. They may have been similar in nature, but their upbringings and the knowledge they received from them couldn’t have been more different. They were shining examples that nurture mattered just as much as nature, if not more.

Not to mention that, according to what Rihyarda was ranting about now, Sylvester had changed a lot once Ferdinand entered the castle. He had been the youngest child in his family, and the appearance of a younger brother made him want to show off as hard as he could. Ferdinand was talented to be sure, but the age gap gave Sylvester an advantage, and the key to his growth was him striving to stay ahead for as long as he could.

But Wilfried had younger siblings close to his age already, and the same motivation wouldn’t apply to him. In fact, he had been lazing about for so long that his little brother and sister would surpass him in the blink of an eye. At this rate, it was inevitable that he would fail and develop an inferiority complex.

“Rihyarda, there is no point in scolding his retainers any further when the problem itself remains. I believe our only option is to discuss his education and training with Sylvester and Florencia, no?” I asked, just as Wilfried’s attendants and guards were starting to look dead inside from all the lecturing. It was clear that anything Rihyarda said from this point onward wouldn’t stick with them, meaning it was just a waste of time that would be better spent taking swifter and more effective action. Assuming the situation was as bad as it seemed, we needed to act as soon as possible.

“Indeed, milady. I’d say that Lord Sylvester doesn’t think Lord Wilfried running from his studies is a big deal because he did the same thing when he himself was younger,” Rihyarda said. “Surely he thinks that no child in the world wants to study, and is averting his gaze

from the awful reality that Lord Wilfried cannot even read and write yet. I will arrange a meeting at once.” At that, she exited the room, her nostrils flaring in anger.

The pale-looking attendants and guards saw her off in a daze. They had gotten so used to spoiling Wilfried that they probably never expected to be scolded so hard, but, well... they had still catastrophically failed at doing their jobs properly.

“Now then, Professor Moritz—I suggest we use this time to write up an education plan for Wilfried.”

“But what about your studies, milady?”

“I was looking forward to seeing just how a child of the archduke is educated, but all you have brought me today is a chart of the alphabet and tables covering basic addition. These are all materials that even the children in my orphanage have mastered; I have nothing to learn from them. It seems that the orphans who work after their baptism ceremony have busier lives than the son of the archduke.” *And next time, bring at least a single book I haven’t read before,* I added internally. That was what I had actually been looking for, but now wasn’t the time to say it. “Wilfried will need to know his letters and numbers before winter as well, yes? I believe there is still time if we rush things starting now.”

“Lady Rozemyne, if I may... I find it hard to believe that Lord Wilfried will be able to master material that he has failed to learn over several years in such a short time span,” Moritz said, indirectly assuring me that he wasn’t a bad teacher and that Wilfried was entirely responsible for his own failures. But if you asked me, anyone who failed to teach a kid to read after several years of trying was probably just doing it wrong. Why hadn’t Moritz tried changing his approach to try and catch Wilfried’s interest?

“The orphans in my orphanage all learned the letters of the alphabet and how to do basic math over the span of a single winter. What matters is being interested and having someone to compete with.”

Assuming that things were advancing according to the schedule I had given to Ferdinand, Wilfried would be playing karuta with the orphans right about now and experiencing a humiliating defeat. My plan had been to bring in picture books, karuta, and playing cards all at once during winter to shock the noble children, but I didn’t see an issue with letting Wilfried play a little early. Assuming he really did share Sylvester’s nature, he would desperately start studying as quickly as he could to win.

“I will have Rihyarda send an ordonnanz to Ferdinand so that he may bring me study materials. I shall teach you how to use them during class tomorrow morning, Professor Moritz.”

Children tend to have very short attention spans, but having various study materials would mean that whenever Wilfried got bored of one, we could just move on to another. Each day he would learn bit by bit. I discussed with Moritz the principle of setting a bunch of small objectives for Wilfried to complete, and how each accomplishment would give him something to brag to his parents about at the dinner table. This would serve as a solid basis for the entire study plan.

At first, Moritz just blinked in surprise, but his eyes grew increasingly fearful as I continued. “Lady Rozemyne, I find it... *ahem...* somewhat hard to believe that you only just finished your baptism.”

“This is surely the result of Ferdinand’s teachings. And while there may be more to it than that, the scriptures say that those who try to learn a woman’s secrets rarely meet a pleasant end,” I said, punctuating my warning with a dark laugh.

This time, Moritz looked at me with genuine terror.

I did that to warn him not to dig any deeper, not to scare him... but I guess I went too far? Whoops.

So many people had treated me like an adult as of late that I’d forgotten how abnormal I really was. A normal kid wouldn’t instruct their tutor on how to teach, and they certainly wouldn’t write up study plans for an older brother who was just about their age.

“Ferdinand has said that I am not quite the average child. But Wilfried is, so please take care not to audibly compare him to me—it will only weaken his motivation,” I said.

Moritz bobbed his head in a fearful nod, looking at me like I was a freak.

Fifth bell rang and there was still no sign of Rihyarda. It was either taking her longer than expected to arrange a meeting, or she was already giving Sylvester a pretty heated lecture.

Once Moritz had left with a study plan going all the way to winter, I turned to Oswald. He was trembling in fear at the thought of Rihyarda getting him fired. “Oswald, what comes next on Wilfried’s schedule?”

“Free time, milady. Wilfried uses this time to practice his swordplay, and goes to meet his younger siblings in the main building if permitted. How shall you spend it, Lady Rozemyne?”

There was only one way I ever wanted to spend my free time. I clapped my hands together and grinned. “This castle has a book room, yes? Please take me there.”

At that, I got into my highbeast and had Oswald guide me to the book room. Wilfried’s attendants and guards were required to follow me as they normally would their charge, and I ignored how they curiously looked at and peered into Lessy as we went. They would get

used to him just like the scholars in the halls who would double- and triple-take at him.

“What a large book room this is!” I exclaimed once we had arrived. It was much bigger than the temple’s, and had more inside as well. Large books lined shelves that were bursting with documents. At a glance, I could see dozens that were too large for me to carry, and hundreds that I could carry. It was much more of a book room than the one in the temple, which was more of a document storage room than anything else. This was the closest thing to a library I had seen yet. The smell of old paper and ink was so pleasant that just being here filled me with energy.

Mmm... It smells so good!

My intention had been to accelerate the whole saint plan so that I could monopolize the temple’s book room, but on second thought, it would be much better to just work in the castle’s book room as a librarian of sorts. I would have to consider marrying Wilfried so that I could get full control over this place.

“Aaah, this is bliss... To think I would stumble upon such a massive treasure trove of books. Oswald, could you hand me the leftmost book on that shelf? You may then go and do whatever other work needs to be done.”

“...To what work do you refer?” Oswald asked, looking curious but maintaining his polite tone.

“You must be busy as a head attendant, no? You may leave the bare minimum number of retainers here and return to Wilfried’s chambers,” I said.

Oswald blinked in surprise as he fetched me the book, but I really didn’t know why he was so confused. My attendants in the temple had loads of work beyond taking care of me, and Rihyarda was always busily moving around my chambers while I was reading. Surely he had a lot to do as well.

“If anyone would like to stay and read with me, they may take priority in staying behind,” I continued. “I believe it is a virtue to share this bliss with others. Furthermore, unless the matter is extremely urgent, do not speak to me before dinnertime.”

And with that said, I opened my book. A smile formed on my face as I peered at the opening page. It was a collection of short stories on chivalry collected from the songs that minstrels would sing about knights. Suffice to say, it would be a very good reference for when I started making my own original books.

Sigh... Wilfried has it so good. I wish I had free time every day.

I had been so busy lately that I hadn’t had an opportunity to read aside from the brief reprieves that Fran sometimes offered me. From the bottom of my heart, I was glad to have switched places with

Wilfried.

I immersed myself in the world of stories, tracing my fingers along the paper and swaying in enticed satisfaction at the smell of the ink. My vision was filled with nothing but letters, and I blocked out all unnecessary sounds. I was so absorbed in my blissful time reading books that I didn't even notice Wilfried's attendants and guards watching me with confused looks on their faces.

"Milady, it's dinner time!" Rihyarda declared, snatching the book away and bringing me back to reality. The timing was unfortunate—the princess's knight had just started on a quest to slay a feybeast that had cursed the princess when she leapt to protect her father, the king.

"Rihyarda, may I borrow this book and bring it to my chambers?"

"Yes, of course. I shall make the necessary arrangements. And by that I mean: Oswald, take care of this. I will be taking milady to the dining hall once she's done changing," Rihyarda said, entrusting the book to Oswald and walking away. She had scheduled a meeting with Sylvester over dinner and was eager to really give him a piece of her mind. As expected, she had ranted quite a bit when arranging it as well.

"Rihyarda, I would like you to send an ordonnanz to Ferdinand as well."

"Oh? And what business do you have with Ferdinand?"

"I would like him to bring study materials for Wilfried. He normally returns to his own chambers for dinner, so once sixth bell rings, we can send him a message without needing to worry about Wilfried asking what was said."

Rihyarda shook her head and gave me an exasperated look. "Sixth bell rang a long time ago, milady." I had apparently been so absorbed in my book that I hadn't even noticed. Whoops.

As soon as we got back to my chambers, Rihyarda prepared the ordonnanz. The feystone grew with mana and changed into the shape of a bird, which I then spoke to.

"Ferdinand, it's Rozemyne. I will be discussing Wilfried's future study plan with Sylvester over dinner, so I would very much appreciate it if you could bring my karuta, picture books, and playing cards at a later time. It can even wait until Wilfried is asleep."

"Be a dear and wait until tomorrow, my boy," Rihyarda added, before swinging her schtappe and sending off the ordonnanz. Given that she had put her foot down, it was safe to assume Ferdinand would deliver them tomorrow.

The ordonnanz returned while I was in the middle of changing. "I will have Fran prepare what you need, but do not begin the discussion until I am there. I have already eaten and do not need food," it said three times in Ferdinand's cold, angry voice before returning to its

feystone form. I didn't know what Wilfried had done in the temple, but it seemed like it would be wise to ask.

Once I had finished changing, I headed to the dining hall with Rihyarda, whose brow was still knitted in anger; Oswald, who was clutching his stomach out of stress; and Wilfried's guards, who were cautiously watching Rihyarda from afar. When we arrived, I was met with a bitterly frowning Sylvester, Karstedt grimacing like he had a headache, and Florencia wearing a peaceful smile. They were all already seated.

"My apologies for being late," I said as I took my seat. "Thank you all for waiting."

"Rihyarda burst into my office earlier yelling her head off. Are you behind this?" Sylvester asked me with a glare.

"...I hardly think it's fair to blame Rihyarda for being so angry," I responded. "Are you not aware of what an awful state Wilfried is in?"

Both Sylvester and Karstedt looked at me with confusion. It was clear from their expressions that they were completely unaware, but I decided it would be better to let Ferdinand's sharp tongue sort them out than to try and say anything myself.

"Ferdinand will be here soon, so I suggest we leave this discussion until after we've finished eating," I suggested, and Sylvester gave an enormous grimace upon hearing that Ferdinand would be coming too.

Once the food was brought in, we ate in silence for a bit until Sylvester eventually broke the ice. "I'll hear how Wilfried is from Ferdinand soon enough, but how have you been finding the switch?" he asked.

Karstedt glanced my way, clearly interested. Oswald, on the other hand, slumped his shoulders and looked at the ground, agonized by memories of Rihyarda's fury.

"I spent half of my study time listening to Rihyarda rage about Wilfried's ignorance, and the other half forming a study plan for him with Moritz. There was absolutely nothing for me to learn from Wilfried's lessons. Were you not perturbed by the reports you were given about him?" I asked.

Wilfried's tutor and attendants had apparently avoided telling the truth, but that wasn't the only issue—given Sylvester's own experiences in the past, whenever he was told that Wilfried had run away and been caught, he just assumed that he had been forced to study afterward. Karstedt was also used to Sylvester running away all the time, so whenever Lamprecht mentioned that Wilfried had escaped again, he just laughed it off as a path that he himself had walked long ago.

"After fifth bell, I was given a rare block of free time, which I spent enjoying a book in the castle book room. This book room is

much larger than the one in the temple, and I lack the words to describe the joy I felt... In any case, it was a blissful experience. I would like to continue switching places with Wilfried so that I may lock myself in the book room and read everything in there,” I said, conveying just how much I enjoyed my time there.

But Sylvester just shook his head in disbelief. “I don’t get you at all, but still—can’t you just read in your own spare time?”

“...Do you think I am given any free time? Once breakfast is done, I practice the harspiel until third bell, then help Ferdinand in his office until lunch. After lunch, I have meetings with business partners, potentially visit Hasse’s orphanage if not our own, study various rituals, and then practice using mana.”

“Uh...”

“Wilfried has oh-so-much free time during the day, on top of the time he spends running away from his studies, and today he was made to work all day just like I do as the High Bishop. I can only imagine what a struggle it has been for him,” I said with a smile.

Sylvester’s eyes widened. “That is far too much work for a child.”

“You are the one who put me in this situation. If not for your orders to prepare the Italian restaurant and spread printing so soon, I would be having a much easier time, so I would not like to hear the man responsible for my workload complain that I am working too much,” I said with a sigh.

“...Are you not leaving most of that to Ferdinand?” Sylvester asked, peering at me with surprise. “I sent that work your way expecting Ferdinand to do it.”

“Oh? Well, that’s not happening. Ferdinand is already busy with his duties as the High Priest, as well as the High Bishop work that I’m incapable of doing yet. Not to mention that he needs to assist you when he comes to the castle, and at times visits the Knight’s Order. How is he supposed to have the spare time to be involved with a new business when he’s already handling my full education? You expect too much from Ferdinand. He is a man of many talents, but he does not have infinite time. If you work him too hard, he will just die,” I concluded, going a bit further than I intended to.

Sylvester looked like he’d been caught completely off guard.

“Wha... Work in the temple’s that hard?” he muttered.

...Um, what? Little late to be noticing that, isn’t it?

“Consider that Ferdinand is single-handedly running an organization of over one hundred people. How could that not be difficult? He has nobody he can safely delegate work to.”

“But all he ever did was ask me to send books over, since he was so bored and had nothing else to do. Not to mention all the stuff to make magic tools. Is he not glad to finally have something to keep

him busy?" Sylvester asked. He was probably thinking of a time when the temple had a lot more blue priests, back before Ferdinand was burdened with an overwhelming mountain of work. But Sylvester always wanted to push things to their limits, and Ferdinand never wanted to admit there was something he couldn't do, so it seemed the change in circumstances had never been clearly conveyed between them. Every time I gave a report to Sylvester, he had just assumed I was speaking for Ferdinand and listing the things *he* had done.

"Sylvester, the printing industry is progressing with me at its epicenter. I am so busy that I have no time to read books, and I would be ever so grateful if you could slow down how fast you wish for the printing industry to expand."

"...Alright. Move things along at your own pace," Sylvester said, letting out a sigh and waving his hand dismissively. Then, in a quiet voice, he added, "Sorry for not noticing sooner."

Benno! Mark! Lutz! I slowed the schedule down a little! Hooray!

Just as I made a victory pose on the inside, the door to the dining hall opened and Ferdinand walked in wearing an exceptionally displeased expression. His brow was furrowed and his eyes narrowed. The atmosphere in the dining hall immediately froze over, and everyone instinctively straightened their backs.

Ferdinand walked up to Sylvester, looked over everyone who was present, then spoke. "Sylvester, your son is a disaster. Remove Wilfried from the line of succession," he said in a quiet, angry voice. A few gasps could be heard from around the room, and Oswald, as Wilfried's head attendant, looked as though he had died where he stood.

"Sylvester, I consider you to be a fine archduke. There are times when you avoid doing paperwork, but you always accomplish your most important duties, and courageously bear the responsibility of leadership. That is why I believed you when you said that you and Wilfried were kindred spirits, both fleeing from your teachers but ultimately doing what was expected of you," Ferdinand said dryly.

His quiet tone was always the scariest since it emphasized his anger. I had no idea what Wilfried had done in the temple to anger him so much, and while he wasn't mad at me, I felt my stomach constrict and the strong urge to apologize. Maybe it was because I was so used to being the one causing his anger.

"I thought that Wilfried would be a fine archduke so long as he had a skilled right-hand man to support him, but Wilfried is not you. And Lamprecht is not Karstedt. They may resemble you two in speech and manners, but you are not the same."

"Is that not obvious...? Children are always different from their parents," Karstedt said, stroking his chin and giving Ferdinand a

confused look.

“Indeed, they are always different. But until Rozemyne pointed it out, I had assumed that your similarities would mean that your children would grow in the same way. I was wrong. Sylvester, you bear the responsibilities of archduke. Wilfried, on the other hand, uses his status as the archduke’s son to avoid any tasks or responsibilities he can. He will never grow up to be like you.”

“Wait! Ferdinand, I have a question!” I declared, shooting up a hand as he thoroughly rejected Wilfried. It was like I’d cut through the tension in the air, and everyone took a deep breath. Ferdinand looked at me as well and jutted his chin, gesturing for me to continue. “Ferdinand, what did Wilfried do to make you draw that conclusion? I think that removing him from the line of succession would have an enormous impact on noble politics, so I would like to know what gives you the confidence to suggest it.”

Sylvester gave a big nod in agreement and leaned forward, waiting to hear the answer.

Ferdinand crossed his arms and looked across the dining hall before beginning to speak. “Rozemyne is the child I know best, and so I assumed that Wilfried only seemed incompetent because I was subconsciously comparing him with Rozemyne. But that was not the case. Wilfried proved to be vastly inferior to Rozemyne’s apprentice attendants, the apprentice merchant working in the workshop, and even the temple’s orphans,” Ferdinand said, offering a scathing critique that made both Sylvester and Florencia widen their eyes in shock. What they had heard from Wilfried’s tutor and attendants differed so much from this appraisal that it was hard to believe.

“That’s going too far,” Sylvester muttered.

I couldn’t help but frown. Ferdinand wasn’t going too far; it was the truth. “Of course he’s worse than them,” I interjected.

Sylvester, Florencia, and Wilfried’s retainers all looked at me like I was crazy. Their eyes made it clear that they couldn’t believe I was comparing the archduke’s son to orphans, but I wasn’t about to back down; unless they properly understood what was going on, they wouldn’t be able to help Wilfried grow.

“The children in my orphanage are strictly trained to be capable of serving blue priests when necessary. Lutz and Gil spend each day working hard toward a clear goal, whereas Wilfried puts no effort into his studies and uses his status to avoid responsibility. They can hardly be compared. In fact, it would be rude to compare them, since Wilfried is so beneath them. But still, that alone wouldn’t be enough to get you this mad, Ferdinand. What did Wilfried do, exactly?”

Oswald hung his head in defeat. Having two people say that Wilfried was worse than the orphans made it clear that we weren’t

just insulting him or being rude.

“Wilfried refused to sit and listen to anything I said. When given work to do, he made no attempt to even begin. That alone I could tolerate due to his resemblance to Sylvester, but he tried to use his status as the archduke’s son to escape. A fool who uses his status to escape responsibility has no hope of ever becoming the archduke. Remove him from the line of succession,” Ferdinand repeated coldly. He spoke from the heart, and his attitude made it clear that his position was unshakable.

The look on Sylvester’s face changed when he realized that Ferdinand had no intention of changing his mind. “Hold on, Ferdinand. We can still fix this. I ran away too when I was a kid, so—”

“Lord Sylvester! I have said many times that you and Lord Wilfried are completely different. Have you not been listening to me?!” Rihyarda exclaimed, once again unleashing her thunder and silencing Sylvester’s attempt to defend his son.

Ferdinand narrowed his eyes even more. His gaze grew distant, like he was looking at someone behind Sylvester, and his lips curved into a cold grin. “It is only natural that the child of an archduke would need to work hard to survive. A useless fool who produces no results is no child of an archduke; the time and effort spent on them would be wasted. Those who are useless have no reason to live. A failure such as Wilfried has no place in the castle, and if you do not wish to abandon him, he will need to start producing results.”

He had worded it a bit more kindly when giving me tasks to fulfill as the archduke’s adopted daughter, but the core idea was the same. I had assumed he was just being harsh on me as an outsider, but it seemed that Ferdinand had equally high expectations for all children of the archduke. That, at least, was fair and easy to understand.

But while I gave a comprehending nod, Sylvester put his hands against his temples and shook his head. “Ferdinand, that’s just too harsh for a seven-year-old child,” he said.

This only widened Ferdinand’s smile—a smile overflowing with mockery and disdain. “What are you saying, Sylvester? I am only repeating what your mother said to me day in and day out when I was brought to the castle following my baptism. Too harsh? What a laughable idea.”

My heart ached as I realized why Ferdinand was so harsh and results-driven, both toward himself and others. He had been forced into a corner from a young age, with harsh lectures and steep expectations allowing him no relief. Ferdinand lived through a childhood where he couldn’t show even a trace of weakness and needed to use potions to force his body to stay healthy. From his perspective, Wilfried was probably so spoiled that he wanted to throw

up in disgust.

“Wilfried is your child and was raised by *her* as well, so he should know this more than well enough by now. And yet, he still acts the way he does. There is nothing that can be done but removing him from your family and expelling him from the castle. The temple will be glad to take him; at least then his mana will have some use,” Ferdinand spat dryly, the intensity of his spite and anger making all those around him gulp.

I had been somewhat aware of Bezewanst and Veronica disliking Ferdinand, but he had been close enough to Sylvester that I assumed things hadn’t been so bad. Never would I have guessed that he had been taken from his parents right after his baptism, bombarded with cruel words every day, and put through so much duress that he spent his childhood struggling to survive.

Ferdinand was so clearly right here that Sylvester could do nothing but grit his teeth, unable to argue. And that was when Florencia placed a hand on Sylvester’s shoulder. He looked up, hoping to have finally found an ally, but froze upon seeing her face.

“Sylvester, what was it that you said to me? ‘Don’t worry, I’ll entrust everything to Mother, and we can be sure he’ll at least grow up like I did.’ I believe that was the line you used to take Wilfried’s education out of my hands and give it to Veronica.”

It seemed that there had been an intense conflict between Florencia and Veronica as in-laws—namely over Florencia being denied control over Wilfried’s upbringing due to Veronica being unwilling to trust him to someone who had just married into the family. She had doted on him as her first grandson and someone who so closely resembled Sylvester, but given the present circumstances, trusting her with him instead had been a clear mistake.

She protected Bezewanst until the very end, so... I guess she’s good-hearted when it comes to blood relatives, but she spoils them so much that the bad eggs have no opportunity to grow. And she’s exceptionally cruel to outsiders in the family like Ferdinand and Florencia. Just thinking about how she probably raised Wilfried makes my head hurt.

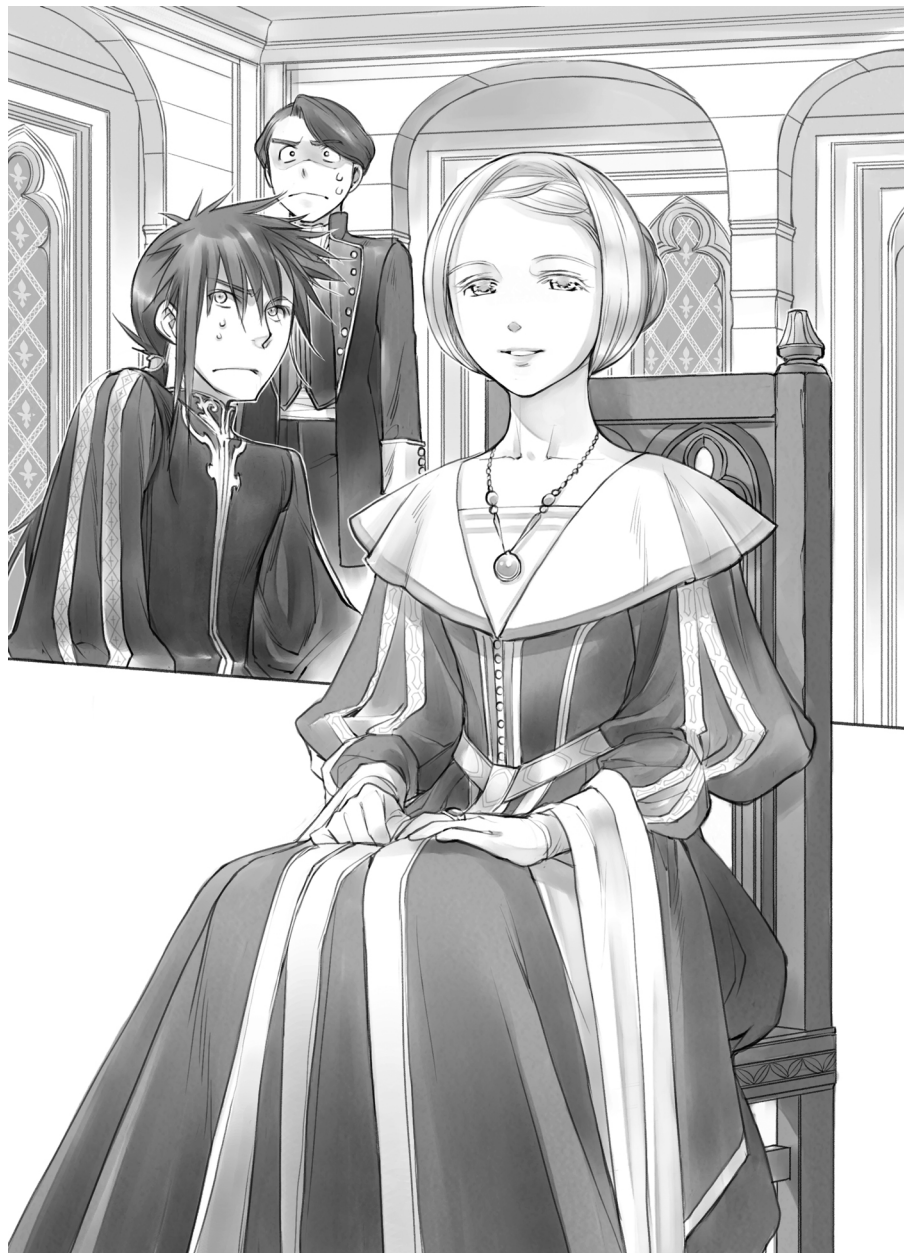
Florencia’s child had been forcibly taken from her, and raised to become someone so incompetent that he wasn’t even fit to be a member of the archduke’s family.

“This is the result of entrusting things to Veronica. Were Wilfried to become the archduke as he is now, who do you expect to support him?” Florencia asked, the fury clear on her face as she looked at Sylvester.

“Er, well...”

“I do not care for your excuses, Sylvester. You have done something to Wilfried that can never be undone.” Despite her calm

smile, it seemed as if angry fires were raging in her light-blue eyes. She looked around the room, then her intense gaze rested on Oswald. "I was wrong to have ever trusted you, Oswald."



“Lady Florencia! Please wait! I can explain!”

“Do not feel the need to explain away your slothful inaction, nor the inaccuracy of the reports you have given us. All I wish to know is the truth,” she said.

At that, she directed a gentle smile my way. It was hard to tell who the anger radiating from beneath was directed at. She could have vented her frustrations by weeping, screaming, and bashing those responsible, but she quashed those urges and instead looked toward the future. In all honesty, I found the resulting look in her eyes beautiful.

“Rozemyne, what do you think? Will you tell me your honest thoughts on Wilfried’s environment and condition compared to your retainers?” she asked.

“Certainly, Florencia. The apprentice merchant who visits my workshop and the attendants raised in the orphanage can read, write, and do math. They learned to do so over a single winter, so it is hard for me to believe that Wilfried would be incapable of all these things despite several years of studying under a tutor. Judging from my experience today, I would say that he lacks goals, dedication, and a proper environment.”

“Is that so?” Florencia asked, her eyes searching for ways to fix the situation.

“People work harder when they have a clear goal to work toward. I think that Wilfried being assigned to the position of archduke from birth has deprived him of such a goal. There is no need for him to work hard, so he has never known the satisfaction of successfully completing a task by oneself. Not only that, but there is no one close to him to celebrate his successes, nor is there a rival for him to compete with... He does not have the proper environment to allow him to grow,” I explained.

Florencia listened closely and nodded, but Sylvester frowned. “...He doesn’t need any competition. Competing with others is one thing, but families shouldn’t need to fight like that.”

“Competition is a key component of growth. I believe that to develop one’s talent as an archduke, one must be put in an environment where they can compete with other potential successors. You may have grown to dislike competition within families, but perhaps this competition is necessary to prevent families from becoming too soft on their own?” *Especially when your family already seems way too soft on one another*, I added on the inside.

Florencia gave a big nod, as if she had heard my thoughts.

“Sylvester,” I continued, “if you truly wish for Wilfried to be your successor, then why did you assign Rihyarda to me rather than him?”

Rihyarda raised you, and she would never spoil him to earn his favor like others would, nor would she have let him remain illiterate and unable to read numbers this far into his life.”

Rihyarda was precious because she was capable of scolding Karstedt, Sylvester, and Ferdinand all at once, with love in her heart. She was better suited being assigned to Wilfried than me, given how I spent more time in the temple than the castle.

“He’ll grow up having to shoulder responsibility whether he wants it or not. Doesn’t he at least deserve a carefree childhood? Being too strict on him now would just be cruel,” Sylvester protested.

“At this rate, it would be even more cruel to let him grow up as he is now,” I said. “He would be treated like a fool for being unable to read and write despite his younger siblings being more than capable, and ridiculed as the only one unable to play the harspiel during winter gatherings. Do you disagree, Sylvester?”

I knew that Sylvester had good intentions but, under some circumstances, too much kindness was actually cruel. He was so focused on the kindness of what he was doing that he didn’t realize how bad things really were, so I had no choice but to thrust his son’s future in his face.

“...That would be true, but he’s been learning the harspiel for a while. Surely he can play some songs,” Sylvester said, thinking back to his own childhood.

Rihyarda’s eyebrows shot up and she marched forward. “Lord Sylvester, I heard from Lord Wilfried’s music professor today that he runs away from practice so frequently that he still cannot play a basic musical scale. How is he supposed to play an entire song? And how will he do the work of an archduke when, after several years of tutoring, he hasn’t even learned to read?”

“He may not be able to do it now, but he will one day.”

“You had what you needed to know drilled into you against your will, but there is nobody to drill knowledge into Lord Wilfried. You are operating on entirely different levels. Just how stubborn are you? Face reality, just as you do at work!” she exclaimed, sharply chiding the archduke himself and proving once again that she was perfect for raising the archduke’s family.

“Veronica is gone now, Sylvester. I shall be taking back control of Wilfried’s education,” Florencia said with a smile. “Just as you were unable to bring yourself to punish her and Bezewanst until the very last moment, you are unable to make the proper decision here. I cannot trust you to deal with family matters.” Discarding Sylvester from the discussion entirely, she turned her back to him and faced me directly. “Rozemyne, as the one who taught the orphans to read and do math in a single winter, how would you correct Wilfried’s learning

environment? If we hurry now, we may be able to educate him before winter socializing.”

She wore the serious expression of a mother wishing to save her son, and so I gave her a nod. “I have some ideas. First, I would reintroduce competition to the line of succession. We can encourage him through fear by explaining that he won’t become the archduke if he continues to be so lazy. But fear alone won’t be enough, so I would also suggest replacing any of his retainers who do not take raising him seriously.”

“Would it not be wise to just replace them all immediately?” Florencia asked, but I shook my head with an understanding smile.

“He has spent much time around his attendants and guards, so replacing them all at once would make him uneasy. But in return, we should assign Rihyarda to watch over them.”

“Rihyarda? But she is your head attendant,” Florencia responded, looking between us both with surprise.

“I will be attending the Harvest Festival and preparing the orphanage for winter soon, so very little of my time prior to winter socializing will be spent in the castle. Rihyarda can use my absence to retrain Wilfried’s retainers.”

I had other attendants who could handle the upkeep of my castle chambers, and while Wilfried’s education was important, training his retainers—that is, his attendants and guards—was just as crucial. Not even the archduke could defy Rihyarda, and she was the best candidate for thoroughly whipping the retainers of the next archduke into shape.

“That would be ideal, but... are you willing to do that, Rihyarda?”

“Of course, Lady Florencia. We can hardly leave Lord Wilfried as he is right now,” Rihyarda said, fixing Oswald with a sharp glare. She was thinking on her feet and more than ready to adapt to the circumstances. Talk about reliable.

“In that case, Rihyarda, I hereby order you to observe Wilfried’s chambers while I am absent, and dedicate yourself to improving his situation.”

“As you wish, milady,” Rihyarda said, kneeling and lowering her head. Seeing that, the anger in Florencia’s smile faded a little with relief.

“Furthermore, I suggest that you show him his parents’ work to help him grow,” I continued. “By seeing the work his father does, he will know what the future holds for him and develop a clear goal to strive toward. It doesn’t have to be for very long, but how about having him sit in Sylvester’s office and watch him work once every two or three days?”

Wilfried threw his status around so carelessly because he didn’t

understand the duties or responsibility an archduke had. It would be wise to teach him what he would need to do should he rise up to the position.

"My, what a splendid idea. So Wilfried could study in Sylvester's office while he worked?"

"Florescia..." Sylvester trailed off, trying his best to offer some weak resistance, but she immediately shut him down with a gentle smile.

"Being a good example for your son is more important than sneaking out to visit the lower city. You *will* be a good father and help, won't you?"

"...O-Of course I will," Sylvester replied, the look in his eyes making it clear that he had no idea how she knew he had gone to the lower city. I would probably do well to learn from Florescia's example here—she didn't interrogate him or forbid him from going to the lower city as soon as she learned about it, but rather waited until the moment was right to give a critical strike.

"Is there anything else that can be done?" she asked me.

"...I suppose he may need a new guard as well. None of Wilfried's current guards seem willing to capture him against his wishes and tie him to a chair without hesitation. I think Eckhart would be better suited for him than Lamprecht," I suggested.

Lamprecht had only come of age a year and a half ago, so Eckhart with his extra years of experience would probably have more of a leg to stand on—not to mention that he had spent years with Ferdinand and deeply respected him. He would probably be as harsh on Wilfried as Ferdinand was, all while wearing a smile.

"Eckhart's out of the question," Karstedt said. "I asked him to guard Wilfried before his baptism, thinking there might be a chance he'd accept, but he refused."

"Might be a chance? Did you expect him to refuse?" I asked.

Ferdinand gave a light shrug. "Rozemyne, Eckhart was my guard before I entered the temple and released him from service. At the moment, he works in the Knight's Order doing paperwork and training recruits, but when I enter the public eye he still accompanies me as my guard."

This was my first time hearing that, but it made sense. Ferdinand was the son of an archduke as well, so it would be weirder for him to *not* have any guard knights. The thought just never occurred to me since I never saw any accompanying him when he was in the temple or the castle.

"I bring guards to the temple, Ferdinand, so why don't you?"

"Our circumstances are different. You became the High Bishop at the archduke's orders after he adopted you, while I entered the temple

of my own volition to demonstrate that I would be leaving the world of politics behind,” he replied.

It was hard for me to argue with that, but I would have thought that he’d return to his old way of life now that his main political opponent, Veronica, was gone. That said, I would be the one who suffered the most from him leaving the temple.

“Eckhart has no intention of serving anyone but Ferdinand. He’s a strange man who would refuse to serve the next archduke, but happily serve a priest,” Karstedt said with a wry smile. Assuming that Eckhart really did support Ferdinand that much, it would probably be wise to avoid having him serve Wilfried, who had been raised by his enemies; forcing Eckhart to serve Wilfried would probably just lead to unnecessary tension.

“If Eckhart won’t do it, then I suppose our only choice is to train Lamprecht.”

“Hmph. No matter how much we change Wilfried’s learning environment, it won’t make a difference unless he himself resolves to change. It would be more effective to remove him from the situation entirely and focus on raising his younger siblings. The faster we get rid of useless dead weight, the better. We will only make things harder on ourselves by not solving the root of the problem,” Ferdinand said coldly with a dismissive look. It was clear that he wasn’t very fond of the conversation shifting to improving Wilfried’s situation however we could.

“Wait just a moment, Ferdinand,” I interjected. “Wilfried isn’t beyond the point of no return just yet. If only his environment was at fault, then we can still fix things. That attendant of mine who you praised earlier on—Gil—was the orphanage’s biggest problem child until just recently. Even a ten-year-old can turn their life around with the right motivation, and Wilfried is only seven. There’s still time.”

Wilfried was young enough that, as long as he did wish to change his ways, he could grow so dramatically that anyone watching would be stunned.

My support for Wilfried put a beaming smile on Sylvester’s face, and he looked at me like he had finally found hope again. “Really, Rozemyne?! There’s still time?!”

“It all depends on his motivation and effort, of course; he will never improve without putting in the necessary amount of work.”

In sharp contrast to Sylvester’s hopeful expression, Ferdinand was wearing an extremely bitter frown. *Does he really want Wilfried disinherited that much?* I wondered, only for him to reach out and pinch my cheek.

“Rozemyne, you have your hands full with so many tasks, and yet you intend to waste unnecessary time and effort on saving a useless

fool who thinks only of escaping responsibility? His stupidity will rub off on you, and regardless, you don't have the time. Give it up," he instructed me. His words were barbed, but I knew he was just worrying about my health. At least, I think he was. Maybe I was just being optimistic.

I held my stinging cheek and glared at Ferdinand. "You are correct to say that I don't have much spare time, but I would feel awful abandoning him and allowing him to be disinherited despite knowing that only his environment is at fault. His mother has finally gotten an opportunity to take his education back from Veronica. If he can be educated, would it not be wise to do so?"

"Rozemyne, I am telling you to not let your emotions guide you into taking on unnecessary work. It is a bad habit of yours," he said, his golden eyes filled with the exasperation of a teacher looking at a disagreeable student.

I pursed my lips in a pout and looked back up at him. "...So you wouldn't mind me getting involved if Wilfried showed motivation?"

"Elaborate."

"There were two tasks in the schedule I gave Fran," I said, holding up two fingers. Ferdinand leaned forward as I did so, seeming just a bit interested. "One was to memorize the words to a prayer, and the other to memorize a single harspiel tune. If Wilfried completes these tasks then it will prove that his learning environment was the problem, and that he does in fact have motivation. In this case, I would ask that you change your opinion of him and assist in his new education plan."

"Oh? And what would you have me do?" Ferdinand replied in a cold voice that showed his utter unwillingness to comply.

I gave him a bright smile. "I ask that you instill a sense of danger in him by threatening to disinherit him, then bash Lamprecht and the others for spoiling him."

Wilfried suddenly being told by the parents he barely spent any time with that he was being disinherited was just too sad. I wanted his parents to praise him, console him, and give him rewards to motivate him, while Ferdinand would serve as the stick that whipped him into shape. Using the right people in the right places made all the difference.

"What else...? Ah, I know—Ferdinand, how does tying Wilfried to a chair and forcing him to study sound? I would like you to etch in his heart and mind that he is about to reach the point of no return. That is your specialty, is it not?"

"Perhaps, but I cannot deny the possibility that I might go too far. Is that acceptable?" Ferdinand asked with an extremely motivated smile. He had said that he wanted to freeze Wilfried's heart and shove

him into the valley of despair, which was exactly what was needed right now.

I nodded, silently praying for Wilfried and Lamprecht's upcoming struggles. It was better for Wilfried to be so scared that he had nightmares than be disinherited in a meeting he didn't even know was happening.

"So, what do you intend to do if Wilfried fails to complete his tasks?"

"That would prove he has no motivation, at which point I would agree that it would be best to remove him from the line of succession and focus on training his younger siblings instead," I answered, causing Ferdinand to raise his eyebrows in surprise. Sylvester hurriedly stood up to say that this was too much, but I continued before he could. "Unfortunately, this all happened because you spoiled him too much, Sylvester. If he doesn't have what it takes, then you have to accept that. He will have until the day winter socializing begins. Should he fail there, the dishonor and mockery will stick with him for the rest of his life. We don't have much time, and I'm much too busy to look after a kid with no motivation."

Sylvester rubbed his temples and sat back down.

Ferdinand looked between the two of us and gave a malicious grin. "Rozemyne, Sylvester—Wilfried made no attempt whatsoever to learn the words of a prayer between fifth and sixth bell; hoping for anything from him is pointless."

Sylvester was wearing a look of despair, but I wasn't really that worried. "Maybe so, but I shall wait until lunch tomorrow to worry about that. If he truly feels nothing and does not attempt to change after seeing the orphans, the workshop, and my attendants, then I will concede that there is no chance he will improve by winter and give up on him on the spot."

"Do not forget those words," Ferdinand said, certain of his victory.

I smiled and nodded. "I won't, but I am sure he will be fine. I would even bet my reading time on it."

Ferdinand's lips instantly twitched. He narrowed his eyes then looked me up and down, searching for my true intentions. "On what basis would you, of all people, gamble your reading time? You have barely interacted with Wilfried, correct?"

"My confidence has nothing to do with Wilfried," I said, putting my hands on my hips and puffing out my chest with a grin of utter pride. "You will find that my attendants are simply the best there is. They have never once failed a task that I've given them, so of course they would succeed in making Wilfried do his work."

Ferdinand widened his eyes, then rubbed his temples and sighed. After a moment, he crossed his arms and towered over me. "Not to

hurt your pride, but I am the one who trained Fran.”

“I’m not just talking about Fran! All of my attendants are great!” I barked as ferociously as I could at this cold observation, causing everyone to burst out in laughter. It seemed that the tension in the room had finally eased.

The next morning, I gathered everyone into Wilfried’s chambers—Moritz and Oswald first, then Wilfried’s attendants, and finally Florencia and Rihyarda. Once they were all there, I showed them the karuta, picture books, and playing cards that Ferdinand had brought and how to use them, then explained that Wilfried could learn by playing rather than listening to instructions.

“You made these, Rozemyne?” Florencia asked in awe as she read a picture book and looked over the karuta.

“I thought them up, but the actual making was done by the workshop workers. The orphanage children learned to read and do math over the winter because they read the picture books, competed with karuta, and played with the cards.” They also knew the names of the Eternal Five, their subordinates, what they rule, and what their divine instruments are. “I heard from one of my guard knights that knowing about the gods would be useful for magic. I believe that having kids play with these study materials over the winter would cause the average level of education for nobles across the entire duchy to shoot up by the end of the season.”

“...Indeed. Learning all of this material before entering the Royal Academy would certainly make lessons there much easier. As the archduke’s son, it would be wise for Wilfried to know all of this ahead of time,” Florencia murmured while delicately touching the karuta. As expected, those and the picture books would sell like hotcakes among the nobles. With that in mind, it would probably be a good idea to print more before the end of winter.

“Once Wilfried returns, we can spend an afternoon teaching him with these. First, he will look at the picture karuta while the tutor reads the written karuta, then he will repeat back the words. He will then read all of the starting letters, write them out, and practice them,” I explained.

Back in my Urano days, I had learned to read and write by writing the first letter of a word while saying it aloud. This was pretty similar, and since Wilfried already knew about half of the letters on top of the ones used in his name, we would be starting with karuta that used those letters.

The general process was practicing how to write while playing with karuta, working hard to seek out the karuta with the letters you knew and getting the ones you had practiced that day. He could play

with his attendants, who would wait ten seconds after the card was read before reaching out. It would be pretty easy to reduce that handicap to eight seconds, and then eventually five as Wilfried got more used to it.

As for the playing cards, it would make the most sense to start with Go Fish until he got used to the numbers. The goal would be to teach him to read them, and also show him that he shouldn't feel frustrated even when he lost. He had to learn to lose. And naturally, he could play games other than Go Fish as well.

The picture books could simply be read aloud to him before he went to bed, once per day. Memorizing the text through speech would help him to follow the words when actually reading himself, and it would probably inspire at least a little interest in writing.

"We need his attendants to be serious about this, so I suggest ranking his attendants in karuta and replacing those who reach the bottom over thirty times. Beating Wilfried should be easy enough, do you not agree?"

The attendants stiffened, but I didn't want them thinking that their laziness would continue to go unpunished. I'd essentially be running them through a sieve and weeding out the weak. As Ferdinand would say: "The future archduke does not need any incompetent attendants, especially when the archduke himself is so hopeless."

"As is true for all games, Wilfried won't learn through exclusively winning or losing. If we want him to take it seriously then we need to sometimes let him win and other times destroy him completely, alternating between the two to bring out his motivation."

I added some suggestions for incorporating teaching into his daily life, like having him count the number of sweets given to him, or drawing numbers in sauce and not letting him eat until he read them, which made Rihyarda give a reassuring smile. "You may count on me, milady," she said.

Shortly after fourth bell, Wilfried and Lamprecht entered the room, both looking emaciated with exhaustion. A single glance was all it took for me to know that Ferdinand had successfully traumatized them with threats, and the satisfied yet unamused expression on his face told me that I had won our bet. I let out a smug laugh, earning me a nasty glare from him.

"Welcome back, everyone. Lunch has already been prepared."

We ate lunch with Sylvester and Florencia, listening to Wilfried talk about what he had seen in the temple. As expected, he had been shocked by the orphans and workshop workers. Once he was done, his parents praised him for successfully completing his tasks. Then, mostly as an act for Wilfried and Lamprecht's sake, Ferdinand gave his

caustic report to Sylvester and Florencia, and I too reported that Wilfried's educational environment was nonsensical.

"...Given the circumstances, I request that his living environment be changed. If that is unfeasible, then I ask that Wilfried be disinherited," Ferdinand said. His harsh words made Wilfried and Lamprecht pale, and they both looked pleadingly at Sylvester.

With all eyes on him, Sylvester stroked his chin as if thinking it over, then nodded. "Very well. I will make my decision based on how far he has come by winter. I will only keep him as my successor if he shows he can write the entire alphabet and all the numbers, do basic math, and play a song on the harspiel by his winter debut."

"By the winter debut...?" Wilfried and Lamprecht choked out in unison, shocked by the sudden deadline and Sylvester's high expectations. Who could blame them? They surely had zero confidence that they could accomplish something in a single season that Wilfried had failed for years.

"Fear not, my dear brother—I have had the learning materials that the orphans used delivered here, and given how you completed your two tasks in a single day, I believe you can finish just barely in time for winter. Though you will be doomed the instant you slow down."

"...Right," Wilfried replied.

"Just barely...?" Lamprecht asked, trailing off.

Wilfried already knew half of the alphabet and numbers; as long as he worked hard and followed my study guide to the letter each day, he would be able to succeed no matter what.

"You sure look like you're in a good mood, Rozemyne. What'd you do in the castle yesterday?" Wilfried asked.

"I spent half of my day working out the study plan for you, but the rest I spent reading in the castle book room. It was a blissful day of reading before bed and right after I woke up."

"...You like to read books? I don't get you at all," he said, but that was because he was illiterate. I was sure that he'd come to appreciate the joys of reading if he learned to read, and would undoubtedly weep tears of gratitude over having such a sizable book room so close to his room, just as I had.

"You want to leave the castle again, don't you, Wilfried? How about we keep switching places for the next three days?"

"No. Never again," Wilfried replied instantly, his face twisted with fear. It seemed that Ferdinand had bullied him pretty hard.

"But, I mean, it's not fair that you get to live such an easy, happy life while I'm struggling so much. I wish I had so much free time and could spend all day reading."

"Ngh... I won't, er... say things are unfair anymore. I was wrong,"

Wilfried forced out before turning away. It seemed that the initial goal of my life-swapping plan—that is, stopping Wilfried from saying that things were unfair each time he saw me because it was annoying as heck—had been completed successfully.

Perfect. Ahahaha...

“That said, I was thinking I would join you in studying this afternoon,” I began, only for Ferdinand to interrupt me.

“No, Rozemyne. You have more pressing matters to attend to, and meetings have already been arranged. You must meet with those who will be accompanying you on the Harvest Festival, then discuss matters with the scholar-official in question to begin softening up Hasse,” he explained. All of that did sound more important than helping Wilfried study. “Wilfried, learn as much from those karuta as you can before we return. Rozemyne shows no mercy, even to beginners.”

He was probably referencing the time I played reversi against him. But I had only gone all-out against him then because I knew that was the only time I’d be able to beat him. I wouldn’t go all-out on a kid like Wilfried.

“...Do you really have to hold a grudge over something so petty? I’ll warn you now—girls don’t like petty men.”

“Few find me a likable person. And as I have grown accustomed to being disliked, that is nothing for me to worry about.”

That’s not good at all... Someone hold an intervention for Ferdinand, too! He’s messed up as a person on, like, a fundamental level. But I can’t say anything to him because I love books so absurdly much that I’m also messed up as a person! Someone, please! You have to save Ferdinand in my place!

Preparing for the Harvest Festival

Having been told to participate in a Harvest Festival meeting that was being held in the castle's main building, I hopped into Lessy and followed after Ferdinand, accompanied by Otilie and four guard knights. Ferdinand glanced my way and grimaced each time a passing scholar balked at my Pandabus, and just as I was starting to enjoy that, we reached the meeting room.

"Eckhart, Justus—I appreciate you both waiting for us," Ferdinand announced once we were inside.

The room was small, containing six chairs around a modest-sized table, and nobody else was there but the two men kneeling in wait. I already recognized Eckhart, so I could guess that the slender guy with gray hair was Justus.

"Rozemyne, this is Justus," Ferdinand explained, immediately confirming my assumption. "He's Rihyarda's son, and shall be accompanying you to the Harvest Festival as a tax official."

"May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the fruitful days of Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind?" Justus intoned.

"You may."

Once the tedious noble greetings were complete, the two men stood up, and Justus steadily looked down at me with his brown eyes. He gave a sympathetic grin upon seeing me tilt my head a bit, then spread out a map on the table, thus beginning the discussion about the Harvest Festival.

They double-checked the schedule, then we went over everything that needed to be done. Fran had already drilled this all into my head, but since I had never attended a Harvest Festival before, I didn't have a clear mental image of the proceedings.

"Regarding the number of carriages, will two per person suffice?" Ferdinand asked.

"Eckhart and I will be fine with just one, but will two be enough for Lady Rozemyne? We men can travel relatively light, but women always end up bringing a considerable amount of luggage. I imagine she will need multiple attendants just for changing clothes," Justus said.

Ferdinand glanced my way with clear amusement. "Rozemyne, how many attendants do you intend to bring?"

“Since I will be attending as the High Bishop, I suppose I’ll be bringing my temple attendants? If so, that will be Fran, Monika, Nicola, and Ella. Should I also have Rosina come along as my musician?” I asked.

That was apparently so few people that Justus widened his eyes, surprised that this would be enough for me. Most attendants in the castle were specialized in a very particular field, but those in the temple were jacks of all trades. For this reason, I wouldn’t need too many people to support myself.

“Oh, and Ferdinand—I won’t need any carriages. I can just use my Pandabus to—” I began, only to be shot down before I could even finish my sentence.

“No. You will need a great deal of mana for gathering the ingredient, and enlarging your highbeast for such a long period would only waste it,” Ferdinand explained. “Furthermore, if you become involved in something dangerous, those accompanying you will be in danger as well, and I cannot prepare enough guard knights to protect all of your attendants. Finally, if you were to lose concentration due to poor health, we would be utterly incapable of progressing until you were better. The carriage will be necessary for the times when you cannot use your highbeast.”

Point taken. In the event of something dangerous happening, my temple attendants would be the ones most at risk. It would be best not to bring them anywhere unsafe.

With the number of carriages decided, Ferdinand moved on to warning me about how to behave during the Harvest Festival. “Listen well, Rozemyne—you are not to separate from these two. Do not wander about without any guards or attendants. There will be an abundance of food served, but do not eat any before your attendants have tested it for poison. When seventh bell rings, leave the celebration to sleep, regardless of who tries to keep you there. Respond to all questions from the town chiefs and mayor with vague answers, and avoid giving them concrete information where you can. If you are ever at a loss, leave everything to Eckhart and Justus. Do not mess this up. Furthermore...”

Ferdinand went on, sounding like a schoolteacher giving a long list of warnings to students about to go on a field trip. He had so many precise instructions that I was now actually less sure about what to do.

Eckhart was listening intently, clearly trying to absorb everything that was being said, but Justus just gave a teasing laugh. “I see that you are as high-strung as always, Lord Ferdinand. I was quite worried when I heard that you had taken a small child into your custody, but I see you are playing the role of a proper guardian. Consider me impressed,” he said, indirectly conveying that Ferdinand had such

high standards—even of children—that he had expected him to have cast me aside already. I could tell from his tone that he was joking around.

Ferdinand glared at Justus, then looked back at me. “I hope that brief list of instructions will suffice.”

Since about a thousand people would gather from the neighboring towns to live in the winter mansion, the Harvest Festival would be a large-scale event, starting in the afternoon and continuing until seventh bell. As the High Bishop, I would be involved from the very beginning, when the baptisms and coming of age ceremonies were held.

The blessings for those two ceremonies are similar, but just different enough to be confusing.

“The festival itself ends at seventh bell, but that is when the town chiefs and mayors begin their reception. This Harvest Festival, you shall be visiting the same locations that the previous High Bishop did. This will inform them that there is a new High Bishop, but also means that your receptions will have been catered to your predecessor. These are not the kinds of receptions you should be receiving yourself, so you are to firmly state that it is time for you to sleep and leave the premises at once. Do not accompany them under any circumstances,” Ferdinand said, uncomfortably refusing to elaborate.

Judging by what I knew about Bezewanst, as well as the understanding looks on Justus and Eckhart’s faces, I could imagine that these “receptions” would be of the steamy nighttime variety with drinks and women prepared.

“But if you refuse a reception, the townsfolk will no doubt flounder and begin to doubt themselves, wondering what it was you disliked, what they did wrong, and what they should do next year. To that end, Eckhart, I ask that you receive the receptions in Rozemyne’s place. Make this sacrifice for your beloved little sister’s sake, and accompany the mayor and town chiefs in her stead.”

“As you wish, Lord Ferdinand.”

Once people learned that the new High Bishop was the adopted daughter of the archduke—a child with incredibly high status—they would apparently flood me with requests, seeing me as easy to exploit. It didn’t help that the previous High Bishop had certainly been willing to participate in such underhanded deals. Thus, Eckhart would be the shield protecting me from the waves of people, all while Justus kept a sharp eye on getting the proper taxes from them.

“Men, if you take your eyes off of Rozemyne for even a moment, she will end up causing problems, nearly dying, and doing any number of unpredictable things with significant consequences. You will need to give her your utmost attention at all times. And

Rozemyne, you are to accompany these two without ever stepping out of line. Understood?”

“Yes,” I replied.

That marked the end of our discussion on the Harvest Festival. Ferdinand immediately took out a few sound-blocking magic tools and set them on the table. Everyone reached out to grab one, so I did as well.

“We will now discuss the true purpose of our meeting: the gathering of ingredients,” Ferdinand said, and both Eckhart and Justus tensed up. The ingredient gathering was apparently going to be done without anyone else knowing.

I tensed up as well.

“Rozemyne, noble children who possess large quantities of mana are given magic tools to absorb it as soon as they are born. Under normal circumstances, it would be unthinkable for you to have been so gravely injured by the Devouring that mana hardened within your core. We are preparing the jureve before you attend the Royal Academy in part to hide the fact that the Devouring put you on the verge of death in the past,” he said, revealing my secret past like it was nothing.

I inhaled and looked at Justus and Eckhart, but they were just nodding as though they were already aware.

“They know everything already. After all, they are the two I sent to investigate your background.”

“Wait, does that mean...?”

“Gatherin’ info in the lower city was dang good fun— Ahem, I mean, it was a very invigorating experience,” Justus said with a smile, his manner of speech turning on a dime. “Specially since there basically wasn’t any information on Myne in the whole city. Even knowin’ from the magic contract that you had a connection to the Gilberta Company, it sure wasn’t easy. You bet it was a fun challenge,” he continued, sounding entirely like a commoner despite sitting properly like an archnoble.

Now knowing that Justus was used for spy work, I looked him over again. His appearance certainly didn’t stick out. His face was average and his hair a common color, and he looked ordinary enough that he could easily disappear into a crowd. He was slightly on the shorter side but not short enough that he would stand out, and even a slightly taller pair of shoes could make up the height difference. And considering that he could also hide his slender build by wearing extra layers of clothes or something like that, he was pretty much perfect for intelligence work.

“Lady Rozemyne, my line of work demands that I be able to mimic men of all statures. I adapt to their speech patterns, movement,

lifestyles, and attitude as is necessary to acquire information. Thus, I believe I understand the difficulties you are experiencing mimicking an archnoble and living as the archduke's adopted daughter. The magnitude of your efforts are not lost to me, and I applaud you for them," Justus said, explaining that he was willing to accompany me as a tax official out of respect for how hard I was working.

As much as I appreciated that, I also found the whole thing a bit confusing. Would an archnoble really need to go out of his way to visit the lower city just to gather information? I cocked my head, and Ferdinand looked at Justus with exasperation.

"As always, Justus frames everything to be in his favor," Ferdinand said. "Rozemyne, know that he is an eccentric man. He loves gathering information and materials above all else, even to the point of dressing as a woman to collect information at a tea party. He became a scholar largely because their work principally involves the accumulation of data, and in this case, he is simply glad that he gets to gather both information and materials at once. Feel no gratitude toward him whatsoever."

Justus had learned at a young age that attendants and servants acted in an entirely different manner when away from their master, saying things that they otherwise wouldn't have. This led to him developing an interest in collecting information. Eventually, Rihyarda ended up yelling that he should become a scholar if he loved gathering information so much, using his enthusiasm to collect valuable intelligence for Sylvester.

"I did gather information for Lord Sylvester as my mother suggested, but it was always Lord Ferdinand, his right-hand man, who properly used it. He connected seemingly irrelevant facts, using them to defeat the nobles opposing him back when he first entered the Royal Academy. The thrill of seeing that shocked me to the core."

Rihyarda's wish for her son to serve Sylvester ultimately went unfulfilled as Justus elected to serve Ferdinand instead, since he was always the one effectively using the information he brought. And when Ferdinand ordered him to infiltrate the lower city—a place that nobles normally never visited—to investigate me, Justus had been so excited that he couldn't sleep. The fact he was excitedly telling me all this just showed how much of a weirdo he really was.

"My information gathering bears fruit daily now that you have appeared by Lord Ferdinand's side. I feel more gratitude than I could ever express," he said, which really didn't make me happy at all.

"Lord Ferdinand, will you not be accompanying us to gather the ruelle?" Eckhart asked, peering at the map.

Letting out an exceptionally perturbed sigh, Ferdinand traced his own planned journey across the map with a finger. "I would like to

accompany you, but with this schedule, I am uncertain that I will be able to find the opportunity.”

“Ferdinand, do you like gathering materials as much as Justus does?” I asked, a bit surprised by the regret in his voice.

At that, Ferdinand glanced over at Justus and grimaced. “I prefer not the gathering itself, but rather thinking of what can be created with new materials. Do not lump me in with Justus, who gets satisfaction just from collecting rare materials.”

“Rozemyne, while Lord Ferdinand was studying in the Royal Academy, he and the apprentice knights fought feybeasts and feyplants to gather the feystones and materials he needed for his magic tool designs. I accompanied him on such missions many times,” Eckhart said, and the mental image of Ferdinand exterminating the trombe flashed through my mind. If he did stuff like that all the time to gather materials, then he might have had a wilder student life than I’d ever expected.

It was rare for me to hear about Ferdinand’s past so I wanted Eckhart to continue, but Ferdinand promptly silenced him with a glare. “A more sizable group would be necessary in a location where large feybeasts wander, but as you need only a fruit from a feyplant, smaller numbers should suffice. Correct, Justus?” he asked.

Justus gave a firm nod. “Indeed. A ruelle tree is a feyplant located on the outskirts of Dorvan that bears fruit on nights with full moons. I collected them once before on a full moon in the summer, and they were quite rich with Wind. There is no mistaking that gathering one on the Night of Schutzaria will provide us the best autumn ingredient for a jureve that one could ask for.”

Apparently, the information we had on what materials could be gathered within the duchy had all been put together by Justus. He really did love gathering materials, and collected whatever he could regardless of the time or place. Ferdinand had narrowed down our options from the times and places recorded in order to determine where it would be best for me to gather my own materials.

“People always call the information I gather useless, and yet Lord Ferdinand always finds the perfect use for it all,” Justus said with a half-smile. “In any case, Lady Rozemyne is still too young to have the schtappe that would normally be used when gathering a ruelle. She will need a knife magic tool to use in its place.”

“I am preparing one now. It should be finished soon,” Ferdinand replied. He was apparently in the middle of making a magic tool for me. As always, he had a sharp eye for detail and was taking care of every little thing.

With that done, Justus explained to me how the gathering would be done, going through each piece of equipment I would need and

explaining its purpose—the leather bags, the gloves, the knife, and so on.

“Lady Rozemyne, once we arrive at the gathering site, please approach the ruelle tree with your highbeast. You should then touch a ruelle with your bare hands and pour mana into it until it changes color. Once that happens, cut it off with your knife magic tool, and that’s it. If you were to put on leather gloves that block mana during that last step then it would make the material a bit worse for your own potion, but others would be able to use it for brewing as well.”

“Understood. I will do my best.”

At that, we had gone over everything there was to discuss about the Harvest Festival and the gathering. We returned the magic tools to Ferdinand, then Eckhart and Justus left the room. We would next meet at the temple on the day I departed for the Harvest Festival.

“I have called Kantna over as well. Sit where you are in silence.”

“Okay.”

Hasse's Contract

Kantna, the scholar-official in charge of Hasse, entered the room. He was an older guy of average height and build, but the phrase "small fry" came to mind the moment I saw him. You could tell just by looking at him that he was a spineless nobody who survived by ingratiating himself with his superiors.

His eyes flitted between Ferdinand and me as he tried to determine whether we had good or bad news for him. Even that made him seem like a sneaky small fry. He was definitely the type to boast to those beneath him while brown-nosing those above him far more than was even necessary.

Once we had exchanged noble greetings, Kantna sat down in the chair that Ferdinand had offered him. His eyes were wandering even more uneasily than before.

"Lord Ferdinand, may I ask why you have called me here today?"

"You cannot tell even with the both of us here?" Ferdinand asked, lowering his voice a little.

Kantna began desperately searching his memories, making a face as though he genuinely didn't know. Perhaps he had forgotten what his job was or had been relocated, or maybe, somehow, he was just flat-out unaware that we were involved with Hasse.

"I beg your pardon, but nothing comes to mind."

"...I am talking about Hasse," Ferdinand replied.

Kantna's eyes flickered for a moment, but his smile remained unfaltering. "Hasse, sir? What has happened in Hasse?"

"The archduke instructed that an orphanage and a printing workshop be constructed in Hasse. Rozemyne and I have been making progress on this task. I recently sent a few merchants I favor and one of Rozemyne's attendants to survey the town, and according to them, you were quite uncooperative."

"Why, that is quite shocking for me to hear..." Kantna continued to smile but his eyes lost focus a little, as though he was running a bunch of calculations through his head. It was clear as day that he was desperately trying to think of a way to save his skin.

"I heard that you were so uncooperative, in fact, that they found themselves considering the possibility that you actively intended to sabotage the plan."

"There must be some mistake. Perhaps the merchants are plotting

something themselves? They are easily corrupted by money, after all.”

Do you know what the word “hypocrite” means? I almost asked, but quickly swallowed the words. I was here to learn how nobles dealt with each other; now wasn’t a good time for me to interject.

“So you are suggesting that they lied to me?”

“Rather, I imagine that we misunderstood each other at some point, perhaps. After all, merchants live solely for profit. They are surely not adjusted to the way we nobles think,” Kantna said with a plastered-on smile. He kept mentioning the merchants over and over, entirely as though he had forgotten that Gil had been there as well.

Ferdinand always told me I was terrible at reading the room, and he was right. I tossed aside my restraint and just started speaking. “Are you saying that my attendant is also not adjusted to how nobles think?” I asked, deliberately not mentioning that Gil really wasn’t adjusted to how nobles thought since I wanted to see how he would react.

Kantna’s eyes widened in surprise and he blinked rapidly, having not expected me to speak as well. “That is not what I...” he began, before quickly trailing off.

I wanted to follow up by asking “Then what *did* you mean?” to drive him into a corner, but I gave up on the idea when Ferdinand smacked my leg beneath the table.

Ferdinand lowered his eyes, then raised his head and put on a thin smile. “I understand your position, then, and will move on to our main point. You signed a contract with the mayor of Hasse to purchase two orphans, did you not?”

“Erm... Y-Yes, I did. What about it?”

“Rozemyne took a liking to those orphans and dragged them away from their orphanage somewhat forcefully. Only later did we learn that the mayor had already signed a contract with you. I summoned you here in case you were unfamiliar with what had happened. It pains me to have so brazenly stolen what was rightfully yours,” Ferdinand said, putting on a worried expression that was so obviously fake to me it was laughable. “It seems, though, that your jealous wife has been probing others to learn why you recently left Ehrenfest. I imagine you would not be so foolish as to buy an orphan on the cusp of coming of age with her at your back, so your actions must have been driven by some pressing circumstances. Am I correct?”

I internally applauded the sheer evil of Ferdinand threatening Kantna while appearing to worry about the situation he was in.

The blood drained from Kantna’s face almost instantly, but the fact that he was still managing a smile despite being as pale as a ghost was very noble-like. “Oh yes, oh yes. Very pressing circumstances indeed. But if Lady Rozemyne has taken an interest in the orphans,

then I shall gladly let her have them. Consider the contract null and void. I will just need a moment to retrieve the papers,” he said, before practically fleeing the room.

Once the door was closed, I looked up at Ferdinand. “You certainly know a lot about Kantna’s wife, don’t you?”

“When negotiating with nobles, the victor is often determined by who knows more about the other. The information Justus gathers is so disorganized that identifying the valuable parts among it all is a challenge, but the rewards are great.”

Justus gathered all sorts of information with great aplomb, while Ferdinand had a fearsome memory and a talent for using the right info at the right time. One could say that, as a duo, they were terrifyingly invincible. Justus had mentioned that only Ferdinand could use his information properly, and that was probably because a normal person would have enormous trouble picking out what was useful from a huge mess of trivia.

I personally had no intention of making either of them my enemy, but they had already investigated me in the lower city and I had no idea how much they knew. I somehow got the feeling that I had more weaknesses to exploit than you could count, and that Ferdinand would probably be able to squish me like a bug in a fraction of a second.

“Fear not, Ferdinand—I will never in my life make an enemy of you, no matter what.”

“What inspired you to say that...? Has Eckhart or Justus given you any strange ideas? All of you are so unbound by rationality that I struggle to understand your actions at times.”

...I’m pretty sure we all just think you’re scary, Ferdinand.

I later learned in conversation that, unlike pathetic ol’ me who decided to obey Ferdinand out of sheer terror, the other two had resolved to serve him for the rest of their lives out of sincere respect from the bottom of their hearts. For that reason, Eckhart told me not to lump myself together with him.

Sorry, Eckhart. I don’t think I’ll ever understand the urge to serve someone like that.

Kantna returned with the contract while Ferdinand was still frowning over my sudden declaration. He held it out, nervously looking at Ferdinand’s furrowed brow and displeased expression. “This is the contract.”

“Ah yes, my thanks. We shall pay for the contract nullification, so take care not to demand money or orphans from Hasse,” Ferdinand said.

All we needed to do now was bring the contract to Hasse to show the mayor, then all this orphan business would be done. I sighed in relief at the worst finally being over, but then Kantna glanced at

Ferdinand and started speaking in a smarmy tone.

“Still, this is somewhat troubling. As we discussed, there are profound circumstances behind this contract; I signed it not for myself, but for another,” he explained.

I had thought that Ferdinand only suggested there were profound circumstances to silence Kantna and give him an excuse for his wife, but apparently Kantna really had been searching for an adult woman at someone else’s request.

“Who put you up to this?” I asked. “Will I need to discuss this matter with them as well?”

We had nullified the contract so that the people of Hasse wouldn’t see us as villains, but I didn’t want Kantna and whoever he had signed it for to think of us in that way either. I had a feeling that nobles being mad at us would be even more of a pain than the mayor being mad at us.

“I would very, very much like to *carefully* and *politely* discuss this with them as well,” Ferdinand added.

“Lady Rozemyne, I, er... I am not sure this is a topic fit for your ears,” Kantna stalled, beginning to sweat and pleading with his eyes for Ferdinand to save him. Apparently this was a conversation that he couldn’t have with me around.

“Rozemyne, that will be enough for today. You may join Wilfried in his studying. Brigitte, Angelica—take Rozemyne where she needs to be,” Ferdinand said, waving his hand to urge me out of the room.

I nodded and left.

Once outside, I traveled to Wilfried’s room in my Pandabus. There I found him engaged in a tepid karuta battle where everyone else was stuck waiting on him. The ten seconds that followed the reading of each card seemed to drag on forever, and Wilfried looked bored as he sat among the art cards, surrounded by his sycophant attendants.

Rihyarda was quietly standing by a wall, looking over the entire room. She was probably identifying which attendants were useless and next on the chopping block. The anger burning in her eyes made her silence all the more scary.

“Wilfried, I know you are in the middle of a game, but I believe I’ll be joining you,” I said. His attendants had been counting to ten as slowly as they possibly could, so I gave them an intimidating smile, counted to ten normally, and then immediately grabbed the art card. Some cards were for letters that Wilfried had only just learned today.

“Wha?! Rozemyne, you’re going too fast!”

“Wrong, dear brother. You’re too slow. Surely you saw the art cards you were familiar with when they were lined up at the start, no? How are you incapable of grabbing them immediately once the writing card has been read aloud? Remember, I am counting to ten

before I move.”

I ultimately beat Wilfried despite joining midway through the game, and looked over his attendants while counting the karuta. *Him, him, and him are getting cut for sure. They simply don't have what it takes.*

“Would you like to play another round? I will even consider it your victory if you can just grab the cards with the letters you learned today.”

“Hmph. That'll be too easy.”

I let him win the first round, but then mixed up the order of the art cards for the second so that he would have to look for them.

“Ngh...! One more round!” he declared.

I had successfully sparked a competitive fire in his heart. We played several more rounds of karuta, and over time, Wilfried developed a solid grasp on all of the letters used in his name.

“That was the wrong one, Wilfried. As penalty, you have to give up one of the cards you got before.”

“What?!” That one card proved to be a deciding factor, and Wilfried stomped the ground in a tantrum once he'd lost.

“You would do well to study hard before we play again,” I remarked.

“I got a lot of cards this time. Next time, I'm gonna get 'em all!”

“Oh? I think you underestimate me,” I replied, but in truth, it already felt like Wilfried was on the verge of beating me. The kids at the orphanage had eventually started beating me, and I felt like the same was about to happen with Wilfried.

Mm... I feel like Wilfried actually has some pretty high base stats. I guess his memory in particular seems to be solid. But maybe this is just because he pours all his energy into the stuff he's interested in, just like Sylvester.

“Shall we move on to learning numbers through playing cards, then?” I suggested.

“...Numbers, huh?”

I lined the cards up from one to ten as Wilfried watched on with a grimace, obviously having a bad history with numbers.

“You had to count to ten several times while we were playing karuta, did you not? I have lined up the cards in numerical order, so touch them from left to right, counting each one as you go.”

“One, two, three...”

Wilfried was able to read up to ten without any problems, so I tried reversing their order to increase the difficulty, then had him grab the numbers as I read them aloud. After that, we played Sevens. It took him a while to be able to quickly count the numbers on the cards, but after that, he was playing just fine.

“Rihyarda, have you decided which attendants to replace?” I

asked, since she had spent the entire studying session carefully watching Wilfried's retainers.

She looked around the room and smiled. "Of course, milady. You said to replace those who lose thirty times, but never said *not* to replace those who lose fewer times than that. I will remove every single lazybones not taking this seriously enough."

"There certainly are many who do not understand the gravity of our situation," Oswald agreed, looking over the room. Florencia had told him to his face that she was wrong to have ever trusted him, which obviously meant that he was in more danger of being replaced than anyone. He understood that well and was now running himself ragged under Rihyarda, so much so that he was like an entirely different person.

Hopefully both he and his liege continue to grow...

A little before sixth bell, Rihyarda received an ordonnanz from Ferdinand, announcing that it was time to return to the temple. He couldn't enter the northern building without permission, so he would be staying in the waiting room until I was ready.

"That's that, Wilfried. I must return to the temple now. I believe that, if you continue practicing as you have been, you will be able to play the harspiel soon."

"Yup," Wilfried replied with a big grin, his face full of confidence. He had memorized a tune that morning and hadn't forgotten it come noon, so it was safe to say his harspiel practice was going smoothly. As practice, he played one bar from the sheet that Rosina had taught him over and over again until his fingers moved smoothly across the strings. It was only five notes, so the clunky, faltering noises soon became fluid.

"This is way easier than I thought," he said. He was checking off his list of tasks to complete much faster than expected, and so long as he didn't get bored and quit partway through, he was on track to learn everything he needed to before his winter debut.

"The only requirement for success is that you start trying in the first place. Keep it up and keep working through your list. In fact, you should show it to Sylvester and Florencia tonight at dinner; I'm sure they'll praise you for your efforts. Anyone can tell how hard you have been working."

"Alright."

I returned to the temple and praised my attendants to no end. If not for their perseverance, Wilfried would have plummeted right down into the pit of eternal failure. *They* were the real hard workers here.

"Well done, everyone. I'm overjoyed at how things turned out, and I am proud to be your mistress."

“We are used to your incomprehensible requests coming without warning,” Fran replied with a half-smile. I took this opportunity to ask them what they had thought of Wilfried as attendants.

“Compared to the pre-baptism children who come to the temple as soon-to-be apprentice blue priests, he was nothing out of the ordinary. The fact that he listened to us at all made him much more obedient than most,” Fran replied, and I got a little headache at the thought of the apprentice priests and shrine maidens we would be dealing with in the future.

The next day was a normal one; I practiced harspiel as I always did, then went to help Ferdinand. When I arrived, he held out a sound-blocking magic tool for me.

“Regarding what Kantna said after you departed yesterday...” Ferdinand began, before proceeding to explain that there were dramatically fewer gray shrine maidens being provided to nobles than before.

In the past, all you had to do was ask the High Bishop for a shrine maiden and it was a done deal, but Bezewanst had gotten rid of all the unattractive ones to cut down on food costs, and the remaining good-looking ones had been given work in my workshop and the orphanage. This meant that there weren’t any left for the nobles, and those who tried asking blue priests for their gray shrine maiden attendants found themselves being significantly overcharged. The blue priests were reluctant to let go of their attendants because, apparently, they found it difficult to ask either Ferdinand or me for new ones.

As for the nobles themselves, they also found it hard to ask Ferdinand to send shrine maidens their way since, unlike Bezewanst, he had no interest in flower offerings whatsoever. Plus, as gray shrine maidens were especially favored for how inexpensive they were, nobles didn’t believe it was worth paying the exorbitant prices the blue priests were asking for. The result was nobles being sent out to find orphans of suitable ages from the orphanages in nearby cities.

“How do you respond to this, Rozemyne? Will you sell the gray shrine maidens to nobles?” Ferdinand asked, eyeing me carefully as if ready to judge my response.

“If there are gray shrine maidens who would much prefer to be a noble’s concubine than continue to be a shrine maiden, then... while I feel resistance to it myself, I would be willing to consider it as an alternative form of employment for them. That said, I have no intention of ever selling gray shrine maidens who don’t want that kind of life. They support my workshop right now, and ultimately, I am the one who determines how the orphans are to live.”

Ferdinand nodded at my reply with a strict look in his light-

golden eyes. "In that case, what do you intend to do about the nobles buying orphans from nearby orphanages?"

The idea of orphans being bought and sold made me sick, but that was because I was applying the morals from my world to this one. Now that I was aware of this, I didn't feel quite as much disgust as I used to.

"...Benno informed me that the city orphans are raised by the mayor and his people, which makes them shared property essential to buying resources for the winter. It is not my place to abuse my authority and interfere with this," I said. "I am unable to save all of the orphans in the duchy in any case, and it is best that I do not try to get involved in matters outside of my field."

It would be easy to take all of the orphans from Hasse using my authority as the archduke's adopted daughter, but I had no idea how many problems that would cause or where. And Hasse wasn't the only place with orphans. I simply did not have the power to save every orphan in the duchy.

On top of that, as the High Bishop, what I needed to think about more than anything else was the temple's orphanage. It would be wrong for me to thoughtlessly try to extend my reach to the orphanages of other cities, so while I would do what I could in the monastery in Hasse, anything else was out of sight and out of mind. It was hard to accept this, but unless I sucked it up and grew as a person, I wouldn't be able to survive here.

"A respectable response. It is good to see that you are learning," Ferdinand replied, giving a satisfied nod. A mean-spirited smile then crept onto his face as he continued his line of questioning. "In that case, Rozemyne—what will you do regarding the orphans still with Hasse's mayor? They are in your sights now, are they not?"

I bit my lip, then shook my head. "Unlike temple orphans, city orphans are made citizens and given plots of land when they grow up. Girls can use these plots to engineer marriages, and from what I have learned, I believe that many can find more happiness living as a citizen in a region they're familiar with than spending the rest of their lives in the temple as a priest."

Each orphan was faced with two choices: they could reject their current lifestyle entirely and be reeducated from the ground up, living a futureless life serving nobles as a priest or shrine maiden, or they could continue as they were, enduring a life that was harsh and full of struggles but at least made sense to them. Only they themselves could say which they would prefer, and personally, had I been given the option, I would have rather stayed with my family than become the archduke's adopted daughter.

"I have already given them a choice. The moment they chose to

remain with the mayor, they ceased being a matter of concern for me," I replied, knowing that this was the proper answer for the daughter of an archduke to give.

Ferdinand nodded in approval. Upon seeing his satisfaction, I sighed in relief at having not made any mistakes, then slowly lowered my eyes to the floor.

Ah, I hate this... I feel like a part of me was just painted over and turned the color of a noble.

Starting Merchant Activities

It had become tradition for visitors from the Gilberta Company to be brought to my hidden room. By this point, Brigitte didn't even react to it, and Damuel followed us inside with an exhausted look. He should have adjusted by now, in my opinion, but apparently he just couldn't get over seeing me cling to Lutz.

"Lutz, Lutz, Lutz! I hate thiiiis! Being a noble suuucks! My head's gonna explooode!"

"What the heck happened this time?!"

"What's normal for nobles isn't normal for me! And what's normal for me isn't normal for anyone! Trying to fit in with everyone is so hard! I don't even want to think! Aaah! Geez!"

"Lady Rozemyne, you're starting to sound like Delia," Gil pointed out with a chuckle. Nobody seemed too worried since me having the energy to blow off steam by yelling meant that it wasn't too serious. Or so they thought, anyway.

"I actually want to scream as loud as I can, okay? Like... GEEEEEEZ!"

"So... did that make you feel any better?" Lutz asked.

"Mm... Just a bit," I replied.

Shouting that loud did actually make me feel a little better. I couldn't scream in the High Bishop's chambers, and definitely not in my room in the castle; that would tarnish the image of me being a saint that everyone was working so desperately to build. Despite how it might have seemed, I really was working my hardest to act like a cultured noble girl.

After dumping my complaints on Lutz, I let out a heavy sigh and turned to face everyone else from the Gilberta Company. "Anyway, I did super well, so get ready to pile on the compliments. I managed to get Sylvester to agree to let me spread the printing industry at my own pace, *and* I got Kantna to nullify his contract with Hasse. Ferdinand told me that a new scholar-official has been put in charge of Hasse in Kantna's place, and he also said we could do whatever we wanted in regard to rumors. Impressive, right?" I asked, puffing out my chest with pride.

Lutz rubbed a hand against my head. "Yeah, real impressive," he said. "You did good."

"Good job, Rozemyne. Things should be a lot easier on us now,"

Benno added with a nod.

“Indeed. We won’t be able to make paper over the winter, which would have slowed the printing industry’s growth no matter what, so just knowing that the archduke does not have his former sense of urgency is an immense relief,” Mark agreed. “Now we can dedicate our all to this Hasse matter.”

Life as a noble sucked and was full of annoying hang-ups, but trying my hardest despite that had been worth it. Everyone praised me, completely recharging my energy reserves. They gave me the strength to keep carrying on.

“Umm, right—so let’s talk about the rumors. I have no idea how fast merchants around here can spread information, or how much influence they have, so I’ll be seeing how Mark does things and learning from that,” I said.

At that, Mark gave me a smile that was brimming with motivation. It was actually a fairly dark smile, but compared to the one Ferdinand wore when he was plotting something, it might as well have been a goofy grin. “I shall dedicate my all so that you might learn as much as you can,” he said. “Have you decided how we shall drive the rat into a cor— Ahem, rather, have you decided on an ideal end state for this matter?”

Seriously, just how badly did Hasse’s mayor treat Mark and Benno...? I want to know, but at the same time, I really don’t think I do.

“Ultimately, I would like for Hasse and the monastery to coexist in peace. I want to earn points with Ferdinand by reinforcing my saint narrative while forming an opposing faction that wishes to cooperate with me, thereby minimizing casualties. As for the mayor... I believe he’s a lost cause, but since Hasse is a city with a winter mansion, a lot of townsfolk are going to gather there, right? I’m hoping that the innocent townspeople don’t get wrapped up in this and suffer with the others.”

“With the others, you say? Have punishments for those other than the mayor already been decided?” Mark asked. His eyes widened the moment I nodded, and I heard Benno inhale sharply.

“Ferdinand said we can spread the following rumor to make the city’s citizens uneasy: ‘The High Priest has decided not to send any blue priests to Hasse at the next Spring Prayer.’”

“That’ll be rough on the farmers...” Benno said. On a fundamental level, the earth of a duchy contained mana thanks to the archduke’s protection. But it was a layer of mana spread incredibly thin, so more mana needed to be provided to feed all the citizens in a duchy. That was where the blue priests came in; they weren’t proper nobles, but they had mana and could travel across the duchy during Spring Prayer to spread it around.

The mana provided to farming towns was a blessing that had a considerable impact on their harvest. Farmers who worked hard enough could still produce respectable harvests for a year or two without Spring Prayer, but without mana, the earth would gradually go barren and become harder to farm on. After the Sovereignty's purge, all the young blue priests with modest amounts of mana were called back to noble society, greatly reducing both the quality and quantity of priests and shrine maidens available. As a result, the duchy of Ehrenfest as a whole was lacking in the mana necessary to refill the earth.

Ferdinand predicted that the harvest would be bigger this year than last, largely thanks to the mana I provided. He also said that, next year, there would be a huge difference between the harvest reaped by the Spring Prayer-less Hasse and that of the lands that received my blessings.

"Ferdinand said that he would determine whether Hasse will also be punished at the next Harvest Festival based on their behavior and my methods."

Benno crossed his arms and frowned, deep in thought.

"Rozemyne, you said that you nullified the contract between the scholar and Hasse, but what ultimately happened with the contract between him and the mayor? Did you pay for the orphans?"

"I will soon. Ferdinand and I are planning on going to Hasse the day after tomorrow."

Mark wrote that down in his diptych, nodding all the while, then looked at Benno with a sharp glint in his eyes. "In that case, Master Benno, how about we spread a rumor that the people of Hasse disrespected priests over the matter of some orphans, and that while the priests are furious, Lady Rozemyne is currently containing their wrath?"

"Sounds good to me. We can also add that they messed up hard enough that they'd all be dead already if not for Rozemyne," Benno said, stroking his chin while agreeing with Mark. "What's important is emphasizing the fact that the only reason they haven't been punished yet is because of Rozemyne's mercy and compassion."

Lutz listened to their discussion with an intensely serious expression.

"If we go to Hasse after spreading these rumors, the people we know from the carpentry workshops will come to us to talk," Mark said. "We can use that opportunity to mention how Lady Rozemyne is weeping over the tragedy and praying that Hasse emerges as unscathed as possible, as well as what would have happened to them if they had done something like that in the city of Ehrenfest. That will split the citizens into two groups: those who quake in fear of nobles

and form an opposition to the mayor, and those who side with the mayor and attempt to use his noble connections to weather the imminent storm. They have lived up until now with the former High Bishop accommodating their needs, and if they have a letter confirming this will continue to be the case then they will surely attempt to keep doing so.

“Assuming the rumors spread as planned, you will no doubt be approached by nervous citizens at the Harvest Festival. You should use the opportunity to have your attendants inform them that the High Priest decided not to send priests to Hasse during Spring Prayer, and that, while you are doing your best to console him and the archduke, they are both profoundly angry. That will make the issue a topic of interest within the winter mansion, and much discussion will surely be had.”

I nodded as I listened, writing everything I should do in my diptych so that I would remember. Benno, on the other hand, looked a bit confused.

“Mark, wasn’t the first rumor supposed to be that the people of Hasse attacked a monastery the archduke had built for his daughter? And that, no matter how compassionate the High Bishop is, not even she can quell his wrath entirely?”

“That is not Lady Rozemyne’s job, Master Benno, but ours. When the Harvest Festival ends and we return to Ehrenfest with the priests, that is what we shall tell the farmers,” Mark replied. Had the farmers already known that Hasse was being charged with treason against the archduke, the Harvest Festival would be the least of their worries; the city would fall into a huge panic, and when I attended as the High Bishop, it was likely I would be swarmed by commoners. That wasn’t ideal, nor was it a safe situation.

“It is a show of consideration, allowing them to enjoy the Harvest Festival before their difficulties begin,” Mark said with a smile. “Upon hearing the news, they will wish to rush to the temple for details, only to find that the former High Bishop is gone and the blue priests, along with the merciful Lady Rozemyne, are absent due to the Harvest Festival. With nowhere else to go, they would likely wander around Ehrenfest in search of more information, but find none and come to a screeching halt. After all, those who control information control everything.

“The monastery incident is undoubtedly treason against the archduke; not even you could prevent there from being any consequences, Lady Rozemyne. What conclusion will Hasse come to? Aah, perhaps we should note that the mayor will likely be punished for the incident, so they do not get ahead of themselves and kill him before we get the opportunity to. I can only imagine how his position

will change during the winter.”

Once Mark had concluded, his lips curved into a grin. He was making it pretty obvious that his highest priority was getting revenge against the mayor, but that was fine; Ferdinand wanted me to isolate the mayor, and if Mark accomplished that then I didn't mind him getting some revenge along the way.

“So basically... we spread rumors and then wait?” I asked.

“Yeah. With the monastery closed down for winter, you won't have any reason to go to Hasse after the Harvest Festival, and we'll be taking the priests back to Ehrenfest. Not much we can do but wait and see what conclusion they come to, whether a leader pops up to organize the city against the mayor, and so on,” Benno said.

The knowledge that once the Harvest Festival was over I wouldn't have to deal with Hasse until spring took a huge burden off my shoulders. “Great! I don't need to think about Hasse until spring, then.”

“Hey, hold it. Think about it a little.”

“But there's nothing I can do, right? And I'm not one to think about all these complicated social problems, anyway; that's not what I'm built for. All I want to do is lock myself in a room stacked with books and spend all day reading. I want to be on good terms with Hasse so the printing workshop has an easier time of things, but as long as nobody's dying, I don't actually care what happens to Hasse's mayor and its people.”

I was only using my head so hard here because Ferdinand and everyone else were speaking noble logic that would lead to the entirety of Hasse being crushed, with all the senseless death that entailed.

“It's a pain, but you're the one giving us the final instructions. You've gotta at least keep an eye on the situation. If you want to play dumb, you'll be on the same level as Hasse's mayor.”

“Mm... Okay. From now until the Harvest Festival, I want Lutz and Gil to see how the rumors spread through the city, and how Hasse and the merchants visiting it change over time. I'll visit frequently via highbeast, and I ask that you both report the circumstances to me each time I return.”

“Sure, but information's not the only thing you want, yeah?” Lutz asked, shooting a glance my way.

I returned a smile. He had seen right through me.

Why can't I hide anything from him?

“I want you to buy cow and pig skin before the Harvest Festival and make hide glue in Hasse,” I said. “We still have some left over from last year, but I don't know how much we'll need moving forward, so I want to make some more this year just in case. I hope

you can occasionally go and check out the situation in Hasse while you're making the hide glue."

"That's what I thought. Sure, that can work." Lutz and Gil both agreed to my request.

I cared way more about making hide glue for next year than I did about Hasse, which would probably end up just like Mark expected.

"Also, this. Could you deliver this for me?" I asked, handing Lutz a letter addressed to my family. In it, I talked about how life had been for me lately, asked Mom and Tuuli to make a hairpin for my winter debut, and asked Dad to guard Benno as he guided the priests home after the Harvest Festival. I wanted the city guards to protect them on their way back, especially given that they were going to be rushing home after spreading brutal rumors through Hasse.

"Benno, I know that the guards won't be able to drink beer despite it being the Harvest Festival, but I would at least like them to have some of the fancy food my chefs make. Could I ask you to get the ingredients for me?"

"Alright. I'll bring some food along with the stuff I plan on selling there. Be sure to cook some for us too, though—not just for the soldiers. Also, you're paying for the extra wagons we'll need."

"...That's fair. Thank you."

Two days had passed since Mark was given permission to spread rumors. Lutz told me that all of the major store owners—as well as the guildmaster—now knew that the people of Hasse had disrespected priests over some orphans being taken, and that while the other priests were mad, the new High Bishop was containing their wrath.

Today was the day that Ferdinand and I would be going to Hasse with the contract that Kantna had given us. My attendants Fran and Monika were accompanying us, as well as my guard knights Damuel and Brigitte.

"Well then, we shall see whether those in Hasse understand the position they are in a bit better now," Ferdinand said.

If they *had* understood the letter then they'd no doubt be groveling at our feet, but I couldn't help but wonder if any of them actually knew how to decipher it. I had personally wanted to write the letter using language that a commoner could easily understand, but Fran had said with a cold smile that, as the High Bishop and daughter of the archduke, I needed to follow proper noble traditions to avoid being looked down upon as a weak child. His smile so closely resembled the one that Mark wore whenever Benno was disrespected that I had no choice but to have the letter written with the usual noble euphemisms.

"I hope they read the letter, but they probably wouldn't have been

able to understand it properly unless they had someone used to reading noble euphemisms..." I replied. That said, Hasse was only half a day's journey from Ehrenfest; the rumors that Mark had spread might have reached them already, assuming the merchants weren't so afraid of getting wrapped up in matters that they were blasting through Hasse without saying much.

We traveled on highbeast from the monastery to the mayor's estate. I could see a caravan of merchants traveling with carriages pointing toward us and conversing among themselves. This would no doubt add to the weight of the rumors, since the old High Bishop only ever traveled by carriage, and here we were visiting the mayor using highbeasts only nobles had.

Once Fran, Monika, and Brigitte had stepped out of the Pandabus, I returned it to its feystone form and placed it back in the cage on my hip. It was a pretty speedy process since I was so used to doing it by now.

"Honorable High Bishop and High Priest, we welcome you."

A man named Richt greeted us at the door. I hadn't seen him the last time we came, but he was apparently related to the mayor and assisted him with his duties. He was probably like his right-hand man, and I could guess that he did most of the mayor's actual work; he definitely looked like he'd be better at paperwork than the mayor. At a glance, he looked about as old as Karstedt—in his mid to late thirties—and I got the impression that he was the kind of middle-manager who tried to micro-manage both those above and beneath him.

"What brings you here today?" he asked once he had given us the standard greeting for nobles.

Fran stepped forward to tell him today's business. "As was written in the letter arranging this meeting, we are here to formally purchase the orphans."

Richt nodded, but at the same time, he seemed a bit unsettled. It was as though he didn't quite understand how things had come to this.

"We very much appreciate your consideration, though I must ask whether there is anything we should know about this change of heart."

"Lady Rozemyne did not realize that Hasse intended to weather the winter using the money earned by selling the orphans until a merchant we favor informed her of such. We intended only to relieve Hasse of the orphans draining its resources, and thought that doing so would lessen the burden on Hasse," Fran explained.

That was the truth; anyone who had worked as the temple's orphanage director would know all too well how much it cost to support orphans. I had thought that if they didn't even have the

money to properly feed their orphans, they would have been glad to let us take them into the monastery.

“The merchant kindly informed me that taking orphans already signed to a noble would put Hasse in a very bad spot indeed. My apologies for not noticing sooner; I was raised in the temple and my sheltered innocence can be oh-so troubling at times,” I said, placing a worried hand on my cheek.

Ferdinand shot me a cold glare that seemed to say “In what world are you innocent?” but I ignored him completely.

“Thus, Lady Rozemyne contacted Lord Kantna the scholar and negotiated for the contract to be nullified,” Fran said, showing Kantna’s contract. Richt’s expression softened with relief almost instantly. There was no doubt in my mind that he really had been agonizing over the conflict with nobles that would have arisen from the orphans being taken away.

“Now that the contract has been nullified, I would like to officially buy Nora and the others,” I said. “Will that be acceptable?”

“Of course. Please, follow me.”

Judging by Richt’s tone, the rumors from the merchants hadn’t yet reached Hasse. I couldn’t help but wonder how the flow of information worked here. In the past, I had never left the city and only heard rumors from my family and Lutz, so I wasn’t entirely sure how farming towns got their information.

I was taken to the mayor’s room and offered a seat. They served not tea, but rather fresh juice squeezed from local apfelsige. The pink liquid was poured into a silver cup no doubt used for noble visitors. Both proper technique and high-quality leaves were important for making tasty tea, and I could imagine that Hasse didn’t have the capacity to prepare expensive tea for rare noble visitors.

“Which wine would you prefer?” Richt asked Ferdinand, despite having just given me juice.

Wine at noon? Even though we came here on business?

Ferdinand and I blinked in surprise, which wasn’t the reaction Richt had expected. He faltered a little. Bezewanst and his priests had apparently welcomed wine at any time of the day.

“I desire no wine. I shall drink what the High Bishop is having,” Ferdinand replied. And so he was also poured a glass of fruit juice, served in a similar silver cup.

Fran took the cup, smelled it, examined the color, swished it around, and then drank one mouthful. He swallowed it slowly, before wiping his mouth with a finger and checking to see if anything had happened to the cup.

With the poison testing done, Fran used a cloth to wipe the lip of the cup before presenting the drinks to Ferdinand and me, all while

Monika wrote down the steps she had just observed on her diptych. I watched her out of the corner of my eye as I moved to pick up the cup, only to suddenly freeze.

So heavy...!

The silver goblet was stupidly heavy compared to the cups I usually used. I couldn't pick it up with one hand, and even when I tried using both, my arms trembled like crazy.

I'm going to spill this. I'm going to drop the cup when I try to drink from it.

Fran immediately noticed my problem and extended a hand to assist me—or rather, he picked up the cup over my hand and brought it to my mouth for me. I took a sip, and a refreshing citrus flavor spread through my mouth.

With that done, it was finally time to get to business.

“So, just to make sure I understand this correctly—we are nullifying my contract with Lord Kantna and signing a new one to sell the orphans to the High Priest and Lady Rozemyne, the newly assigned High Bishop?” the mayor asked.

“Indeed.”

After giving the mayor the same explanation he had given Richt, Fran presented Kantna's contract. The mayor agreed to nullifying it and prepared a new contract for us to officially purchase Nora and the others. As the High Bishop, I signed the contract alongside the mayor. Then, once Fran had paid the money, it was done. I sighed in relief at everything having finished without any major problems.

The mayor was probably equally relieved that his contract with the scholar-official was being nullified and he was still safely earning the money. I saw his shoulders loosen up, but then he gave a nasty grin—one so gross that I felt uncomfortable just looking at it.

“Still, Lord Bezewanst certainly has impressive influence, even after retiring. I would expect nothing less from the uncle of the archduke himself. He truly is a powerful man,” the mayor said in a slimy tone. He had unsurprisingly failed to properly understand the letter, which meant that he still didn't know Bezewanst was dead. He was even emphasizing the fact that he was the archduke's uncle.

Sure, he was Sylvester's uncle, but he was still executed for his crimes, okay?

The mayor didn't seem to know that I had been assigned to the role of High Bishop due to being the archduke's daughter, but he was being so smug that I didn't feel like correcting his misunderstanding.

“I see. I had no idea he was such a respectable man,” I replied, half-listening as the mayor continued to dump praise onto Bezewanst. *But could you please shut up already? I feel like my side's about to freeze up.*

Ferdinand was sitting to my right, radiating a frosty aura with a smile on his face. It was pretty terrifying. The mayor didn't seem to notice that at all, however, and while he was free to dig his own grave and rest his neck on the chopping block, I didn't want him to do it while I was present.

"This is something of a secret, but I have deep connections with the former High Bishop, and he has done much to accommodate my needs over the years. Him speaking to you was of my request, in fact," the mayor said proudly. He had apparently misread the letter so badly that he thought his own letter to the temple had been sent to Bezewanst, who then yelled at us and made us come and pay for the orphans.

...Please, don't say another word! You don't have long to live as it is; don't make the rest of your life even shorter! I cried out inside, but my silent words didn't reach him.

Wearing a satisfied grin, the mayor told us that we would be wise to continue obeying the former High Bishop, since while he was no longer in the temple, he was still the archduke's uncle.

I was sweating hard for the rest of the meeting, just waiting for Ferdinand to explode, but it ultimately ended without issue. I stood up, relieved that I hadn't needed to witness a murder up close, and returned to the monastery.

"Now then, Rozemyne—I will very carefully be watching to see what you do with that moronic, incompetent, hopeless, blustering fool of a mayor. His life is of no concern to us. Learn what you can from his miserable failures," Ferdinand spat. His long string of derogatory adjectives made it more than clear that, if not for the mayor being a learning experience, he would already be dead. Plotting the mayor's downfall was hard, but it was still better than being drenched in a sudden shower of blood.

Though I feel like the mayor's just made things a lot harder for me... I really doubt I'll be able to live up to Ferdinand's expectations here.

"I will do all that I can to isolate the mayor and secure cooperation between Hasse and the monastery. Mark is already quite enthusiastically spreading rumors and progressing our plans, so I ask you to wait until spring for the results to show."

As much as I hope Ferdinand calms down by spring, I kind of doubt he will...

We gathered the monastery's priests together and informed them about the Harvest Festival and our winter plans, including the fact that Lutz and Gil would be coming by to make hide glue. Once that was done, Ferdinand and I returned to Ehrenfest's temple.

Hasse's Harvest Festival

On the morning of the Harvest Festival, Ella, Rosina, Nicola, and Monika left the temple in carriages packed with food, changes of clothes, and other basic necessities. Carriages for Eckhart's and Justus's attendants and belongings soon departed as well.

For health reasons, Ferdinand ultimately decided that I would be traveling to Hasse on highbeast. Damuel and Brigitte would take the lead with Eckhart and Justus following me from behind, which meant that Fran would be the only one riding with me. He and I would be spending the entire Harvest Festival together since he had Ferdinand's potions on hand.

"Rozemyne, be absolutely sure not to push yourself at all," Ferdinand said, having invited me to lunch since my personal chef had now departed.

"Okay," I replied.

Eckhart and Justus were with us as well, and once we had finished lunch and listened to Ferdinand's final warnings, we departed at once.

"Eckhart, Justus—I am counting on you here. Do not take your eyes off Rozemyne for even a moment."

"Yes, sir!"

I brought out my Pandabus, causing Eckhart and Justus to both step back.

"...Rozemyne, is that your highbeast?"

"Of course, Eckhart. Isn't he cute?" I said with a laugh.

Eckhart made a choking sound, rapidly looking between Lessy and me. "I-I mean... Is that not a grun?"

"No, it's not a grun. It's a Pandabus."

"I-I see..." Eckhart replied, his face twitching. Seeing him react so similarly to how Ferdinand had when he first saw the Pandabus reminded me just how poorly most nobles would view Lessy.

...Well, they might not like how he looks at first, but he's cute and convenient. Everything should work out eventually.

As for Justus, though—his eyes beamed with excitement as he saw entrances stretch open for Fran and me to climb into. "Lady Rozemyne, might I ask how this highbeast functions? I would positively love to ride it."

"Justus, are you mad?! Keep those foolish ideas to yourself and

produce your highbeast already,” Ferdinand barked.

At that, Justus shrugged and brought out his highbeast. It was an animal that I hadn’t seen in the Knight’s Order—something like a winged cow, with several horns on its head that really caught the eye. One horn was long and sharp like a unicorn horn, while two others were long and sprawling like the horns of an elk, and they were so big that I was actually worried Justus wouldn’t be able to see where he was going while riding. The legs were like those of a lion or tiger—thick and muscular with sharp claws protruding from its paws.

“Much like your grun, Justus’s highbeast is modeled after a feybeast known as a bahelm,” Ferdinand said.

“My highbeast is *not* a feybeast!”

“It appears as a feybeast to all who see it, but that is irrelevant right now. You must depart at once. The Harvest Festival cannot begin without you,” Ferdinand replied, urging Damuel and Brigitte to leave with a wave of his hand.

Their highbeasts leapt into the air, and I soon followed in my Pandabus. Fran was in the passenger seat today, and while he had initially paled and prepared for death each time he got in, he now barely reacted at all.

As we raced through the air behind Damuel’s winged horse, I reminded Fran of the important job he had to do. “Fran, don’t forget to make contact with Richt during the Harvest Festival.”

“Yes, milady. I need to indirectly inform him that we will not be sending priests to Hasse for Spring Prayer, and that, while you are striving to calm the High Priest, he remains furious with them. Correct?”

“...Not indirectly. I would like for you to be clear with him,” I replied.

It was because we had used noble euphemisms in our letter to the mayor that he still didn’t realize Bezewanst was dead. One could hardly blame him, either—the phrase “climbed the towering stairway” was pretty ambiguous, and any commoner would surely assume he had just gotten a promotion or something. Back on Earth, it would be like trying to convey someone’s death by saying they had “become air” or “left the public”; nobody would understand unless they knew what the phrases meant ahead of time.

Fran furrowed his brow a little and lowered his eyes, then said “Understood” in a hard tone that made his displeasure clear.

“I know that the mayor was close with the previous High Bishop. I understand Ferdinand’s fury at the mayor’s rudeness, and that your respect for him makes you furious as well. But I don’t want everyone in Hasse dying with him.”

“But it was those citizens who attacked the monastery. You are

being too soft on them,” Fran said with a sigh.

So he said, but I needed that jerk of a mayor to get it through his thick skull that Bezewanst was dead before he ticked Ferdinand off more and made my job even harder than he already had.

“Very well, Fran. I will rephrase this for you.” I cleared my throat, then mimicked Ferdinand’s tone of voice, making sure to furrow my brow and make as sullen of a frown as possible. “By informing the mayor that his only ally—the former High Bishop—is dead and that no priests will be sent to Hasse in the spring, we shall cause him and all the citizens of Hasse to tremble with fear, freezing their hearts and pushing them all into the valley of despair. Understood, Fran?”

I looked over at Fran as I spoke, determined to be as far from “soft” as possible, and saw him desperately holding a hand over his mouth to contain his laughter.

“As you wish, milady.”

In the center of Hasse, there was a large U-shaped building similar to old elementary schools I had read about in modern history books. One side was the mayor’s estate and the other was lined with carpentry workshops and smithies, but the far end was the winter mansion that, as its name suggested, was only used during the winter. The farmers from neighboring towns would gather there to spend the colder months.

The plaza in the middle of the U seemed large enough to be used as a field for sports, but today it was being used for our religious ceremonies. A large crowd had already gathered there. The atmosphere was festive and brimming with excitement, completely unlike the usual calm of the city.

We made our highbeasts descend down to the winter mansion just as we had back at Spring Prayer. Some people saw us and pointed up, moving aside to make space for us to land. Soon, a path had formed through the crowd, leading to a stage right next to the building that was meant for religious events. There were tables and chairs for priests and tax officials on the left side, a similar arrangement for Hasse’s officials on the right, and an altar for performing rituals in the middle.

Damuel took the lead, with Brigitte and Fran following behind. I was being carried by Fran, since everyone had shot down the idea of me walking on my own. Eckhart and Justus had said something along the lines of, “We determined that this was the best approach based on how you walked during your baptism and the Starbind Ceremony,” adding that, “Nobody can tolerate the speed at which you walk.”

And so, I advanced to the stage in Fran’s arms. The crowd looked on curiously, with a few people here and there wearing anxious

expressions. They were probably the ones who had heard Mark's rumors.

Eckhart stepped to my side, standing so that the crowd could no longer see me. His expression was tense, and I could see him running his eyes over the gathered people without letting his guard down for an instant.

"Here you are, Lady Rozemyne," Fran said, having set me down and pulled up a chair. Once I was seated, Eckhart and Justus sat to my left and right, while Fran and my two guard knights lined up behind me.

Being on the stage helped me see much more of the crowd; those who were being baptized, coming of age, and getting married were all dressed up and gathered before me. The children who were due to be baptized were wearing white clothes embroidered with autumn's divine color, while those who were coming of age wore simple outfits made with fabric also matching autumn's divine color. Those getting married seemed to be wearing their parents hand-me-downs, judging by how some were covered with fancy decorations and embroidery added over time, while others were plain and clean as if newly made. The women were also wearing lace crowns sewn with autumn plants and fruit.

Here, all ceremonies were held in the autumn. This meant that, unlike in Ehrenfest, even siblings who were born in different seasons could wear the same fancy outfit. This was also why everyone was wearing clothes themed around autumn's divine color.

A glance at the crowd told me that the kids here weren't too different from the ones in Ehrenfest, and while the citizens didn't particularly catch my eye, I got the feeling that the men and older folk from the farming towns were slouching forward a bit more, perhaps due to long years of farm work.

"The Harvest Festival will now begin. Send forth the children to be baptized," the mayor announced, signaling the start of the Harvest Festival to loud cheers and applause from the crowd.

Amid all this, the children being baptized this year climbed up onto the stage. There were about a dozen of them in total, and there was a pretty big size difference between those who just turned seven and those who were about to turn eight.

...Though it's safe to say I'm still smaller than literally all of them.

Fran took out the flat white medals we had brought with us and stepped forward to the kids. One by one, he stamped their blood on a medal, just like the priests had done with the children at my commoner baptism festival back when I was Myne.

I lowered my gaze, looking away until the blood stamping was done. Seeing other people's blood always made me feel

uncomfortable.

Guuuh. Please end soon.

After that came the bible stories, but this time Fran read them from one of my picture books while showing the kids the illustrations. He was reading instead of me because his voice carried better.

The kids all leaned forward as they listened, probably having never seen a picture book before in their lives. Seeing their shining eyes all but confirmed to me that we really would want to establish public schools to help improve the literacy rate.

...Only the city of Ehrenfest has a temple, though, so establishing a school there won't lead to improved literacy rates across the duchy. It would be nice if we had the money to actually build schools, but we don't, and I can't imagine Ferdinand would be particularly enthusiastic about holding another charity concert. Oh, but maybe I could just send gray priests to winter mansions like the one in this city? They could hold temporary, winter-only versions of the classes we have in the temple. Given that the kids and adults would be spending their days bored inside anyway due to all the snow, maybe they'd be eager to learn... Though, that plan would require me to raise the social status of priests first.

As it stood now, gray priests were scorned as orphans, and I wouldn't dare risk locking them in a winter mansion with people who looked down on them. They would almost certainly be treated poorly, and while they could use my authority as a shield to some degree, that wouldn't make their status as an orphan disappear.

"Do you all understand how to pray to the gods now? We shall now proceed on to the High Bishop's blessing," Fran announced, snapping me back to reality.

I stood up and walked to the center of the stage, feeling all eyes on me from both the plaza and the stage. Then, once I had stepped up onto the prepared stand, I took a deep breath. "I am Rozemyne, assigned to the position of High Bishop this past summer by the archduke."

I looked over the children as I introduced myself. They were all blinking in surprise, no doubt taken aback by the fact that I, the High Bishop, was smaller than them. It seemed that they had assumed I was simply tagging along with Fran.

"Let us pray to the gods that you all grow up to be strong and healthy. Praise be to the gods!"

The kids all wore serious expressions, wavering slightly as they got into the praying position that Fran had taught them. Seeing them try their best was so cute that a smile crept onto my face as I poured mana into my ring.

"Now then, I shall gift you all a blessing from the gods," I said. "Please kneel in place."

The kids watched as Fran knelt, then mimicked his posture.

“O Schutzaria, Goddess of Wind, please hear my prayer. We offer thee our thoughts, prayers, and gratitude, so that thou might bless these newly born children and grant them thy divine protection,” I intoned, and a yellow light shot out of my ring before raining down on the children’s heads.

“Holy cow!”

“Woah, it’s shining!”

The kids stood up on the spot and began waving their arms around, trying to get as much light powder on them as possible. It was exactly what you would expect children to do, but Fran seemed to have been caught off guard since he only knew the well-raised orphans in the temple. His eyes were wide, and he was completely frozen in place.

“Thus ends my blessing to you. Please step down from the stage so that the new adults may rise.”

“Sure! Alright!”

“Yer pretty amazin’ for someone so tiny!”

The kids raced off the stage with gleaming eyes, heading straight back to their families. In their place came the new adults.

Once the baptism, coming of age ceremony, and weddings were over, it was time for the other major event of the Harvest Festival to begin. Put simply, it was a grand sports tournament between all of the towns—a competition modeled after the battle between autumn and winter, the winners of which were guaranteed to have a good harvest next year.

Given that I barely ever left the house, this was my first time ever seeing a sports event in person. I excitedly listened to the mayor’s explanation, eager to see what kind of game it was, when Eckhart smoothly stood up.

“Lady Rozemyne, I suggest we return to the monastery.”

“Um... Certainly. If you insist...?”

...What? I thought I could stay at the festival until seventh bell. Fifth bell rang just a second ago, didn’t it?

Eckhart was smiling in a way that showed he wouldn’t accept no for an answer, so I took his hand and stood up, tilting my head in confusion.

“Fran, look over this year’s offerings with Justus. Damuel, guard them as they do so. Brigitte and I will return to the monastery with Lady Rozemyne, serving as her guards.”

“I leave the rest to you, Fran,” I said.

Having speedily given his instructions, Eckhart hefted me up with ease and brought out his highbeast on the stage. He jumped up onto

it, and a second later we were flying through the sky, with Brigitte following right behind us.

“Eckhart, what brought this about?”

“There seem to be many suspicious fellows in Hasse. It’s unlikely that you were in any danger, but anything can happen during a high-energy festival. Better safe than sorry in these situations.”

...Oh, he means Richt.

I had in fact noticed that Richt had been glancing my way since I arrived, looking like there was something he wanted to talk to me about. However, with all the ceremonies taking place and Eckhart, Justus, and Fran surrounding me, he just hadn’t had a chance to walk over. But his repeated glances as he waited for an opportunity had apparently made him look suspicious in Eckhart’s eyes.

“I was looking forward to the festival, you know.”

“The festival will continue on for several more days regardless; you’ll see more than enough whether you want to or not. Your chefs are working extra hard today to reward those in the monastery who couldn’t go to the festival, are they not? That will have to do for today.”

“Okaaaay.”

We had no idea how Hasse would change once the rumors had fully spread, so those in the monastery had been instructed to stay inside during the festival. In return, Ella and Nicola were using the food that Benno had brought to make absolute feasts for the Gilberta Company employees, city soldiers, priests, and shrine maidens.

We arrived at the monastery to find it buzzing with activity as everyone got ready for the feasts and prepared their beds for the night. Meanwhile, soldiers were carrying crates from the Gilberta Company into the kitchen and the barracks at the instructions of gray priests. I caught a glimpse of Dad climbing down the stairs to the kitchen with a box in hand.

Nora and Marthe had taken out the bedding that wasn’t being used in the girls’ dorms, bringing it to the kitchen so that Thore and Rick could then carry it to the boys’ dorms. Monika seemed to be directing them among others herself, and when she saw me arrive, her eyes widened and she came rushing over.

“Lady Rozemyne?! What brings you back so soon? Have you fallen ill?”

“No, I brought her back just to be safe,” Eckhart answered. “Lady Rozemyne, we will be staying in the mayor’s estate tonight. Please wait for us to return for you tomorrow morning.”

“Certainly,” I said with a nod.

Eckhart then turned to look at Monika. “Attendant, prepare a change of clothes for Lady Rozemyne. That is all. I am returning to the

festival.”

“Have enough fun for the both of us,” I said.

Once he had gone, I passed through the chapel with Monika, heading to my hidden room in the back. The room had been fully furnished over my several visits to the monastery, and was now a full-fledged bedroom ready for me to sleep the night in whenever I needed it.

With Monika’s help, I changed out of my ceremonial High Bishop robes and into my bed clothes. Ella, Nicola, and the gray shrine maidens were busy making the food in the kitchen, while Rosina was in the girls’ building preparing rooms for all the girls, including herself. As a noblewoman, Brigitte would be sleeping in my room. She had said that she’d be fine with a bench, so we just needed to bring in a mattress for her.

“We have hardly finished preparations, Lady Rozemyne, so please rest in your room until dinner is ready.”

“Thank you, Monika. Do not mind me at all. I know things are hectic out there, but please do your best.”

And so I did as I was told, resting in my room until the feystone on the wall started to glow. That meant someone was calling for me. Brigitte opened the door, and there stood Gil and Lutz.

“We have something we wish to report, Lady Rozemyne.”

They stepped inside and the door closed. Since Brigitte was here, they both maintained a strict air of formality, and I too kept my back straight while listening to them.

“We have finished making the hide glue as ordered, Lady Rozemyne. It is currently in the workshop, and once it has dried over the winter it will be ready to use,” Gil said.

I responded with a nod, but had Brigitte not been there, I would have given him a pat on the head and a compliment. As the thought crossed my mind, Gil and I made eye contact. He must have been thinking the same thing since he glanced Brigitte’s way and shrugged, and I returned a small smile at our little silent connection.

“Hasse’s orphans were disappointed that they wouldn’t be able to join the festival since they had looked forward to it every year prior to now, but now they are so excited for the food here that they’ve forgotten all about it,” Lutz continued. “Furthermore, it seems that rumors of you paying the soldiers extra for their trouble have spread, so this time the soldiers at the gate fought with all they had to be among those guarding the carriages. Either due to your words or the training of their commander, the soldiers are more cooperative with the priests than they were last time.”

Dad had apparently stood by and watched as the soldiers argued over who would get to guard the carriages, since I had already chosen

him ahead of time. As funny as that was to hear, Lutz was probably telling me so I would be ready to pay extra again.

"I'm glad to hear that the soldiers are being more cooperative. In that case, I'll have to prepare another bonus for them. Lutz, please ask Benno whether he is able to lend me some coins," I replied, having not brought any money myself since I was only here for the Harvest Festival. I could handle any purchases with my guild card anyway, so it hadn't seemed necessary.

Lutz wrote that down in his diptych.

"How are the rumors progressing?" I asked.

"The merchants who heard the news in Ehrenfest sped past the city, giving warnings to anyone who would listen along the way. When Master Benno and Mark arrived in the city, some locals even came over to ask about them. Things are progressing just as Mark expected them to," Lutz answered.

"It seemed like the people from Hasse stopped talking when the farmers started to arrive, so while the city people might know stuff, I don't think the farmers have heard the rumors," Gil continued.

Hearing that reminded me how Richt had been looking my way. "He was probably hoping to stop the spread of panic and confusion..." I mused aloud. If the farmers learned that the previous High Bishop was dead and no priests were going to be sent to the next Spring Prayer, the winter mansion would no doubt descend into panic. "Lutz, ask Mark to shift into the next phase of our plan."

"As you wish."

Not long after we had finished our discussion, Monika came to tell me that dinner was ready. I headed to the dining hall, and there I found everyone kneeling in front of tables covered with food.

"Today is the Harvest Festival," I announced. "As the name so strongly implies, it is a festival, so I ask that you all relax and be at ease."

Everyone looked confused, and who could blame them? There probably didn't exist any other noble who would say something like that to them. But still, with such a huge feast laid out on the table, I wouldn't be able to eat comfortably knowing that everyone was watching me and internally yelling for me to hurry up.

"I am saying that we will eat together. It would be a waste to allow all this warm food to get cold. Call everyone from the kitchen as well. The tables shall be divided between nobles, retainers, priests and shrine maidens, soldiers, and the Gilberta Company, but we can all still eat together."

There might not have been any beer, but there was freshly squeezed fruit juice. After clinking cups together in a cheer, everyone started eating their food.

Brigitte alone frowned as the soldiers behind her erupted in uproarious conversation. As a noble, it was probably hard for her to tolerate.

“My apologies for all this, Brigitte, but it was simply beyond me to eat leisurely with so many eyes watching. I imagine you won’t be all too pleased to eat alongside servants and soldiers, but I hope you can tolerate it for today.”

“Oh, you misunderstand. My family home, Illgner, is very much a backwater province, and we often eat along with our servants and get rowdy with the farmers during celebratory events. I’m used to this kind of thing and don’t feel displeased in the least. I’m just worried about what Lord Ferdinand would think should he hear about this,” Brigitte said, placing a hand on her cheek and glancing my way. It wasn’t hard to imagine that he’d bark in anger.

“We can do this because the other nobles and Fran are staying at the mayor’s estate. Keep it a secret from them, if you would be so kind,” I said, putting my two pointer fingers over my mouth in an X shape.

Brigitte laughed and copied my gesture, likewise forming an X shape over her mouth. “I am more concerned about you letting your tongue slip, Lady Rozemyne.”

Once I had finished eating, I walked around the various tables. The soldiers were all shoveling food into their faces, but when they saw me approach, they all hurriedly set whatever they were eating down. I giggled at the sight of them gazing longingly at their food, then spoke to their representative: Dad.

“Are you all enjoying your time here?”

“The lack of beer’s a shame, but the food’s top-notch,” Dad replied. “Right, everyone?”

The soldiers all nodded.

“Yeah, I’ve never had food like this before,” one said.

“This food alone makes coming here worth it. Some beer would make it absolutely perfect,” added another.

While they were trying their best to speak politely, their eyes were all locked on their food. Everyone was just silently begging me to let them eat again.

“I’m glad to hear you are all enjoying it. I shall inform the chef later,” I said. “Please, continue eating.”

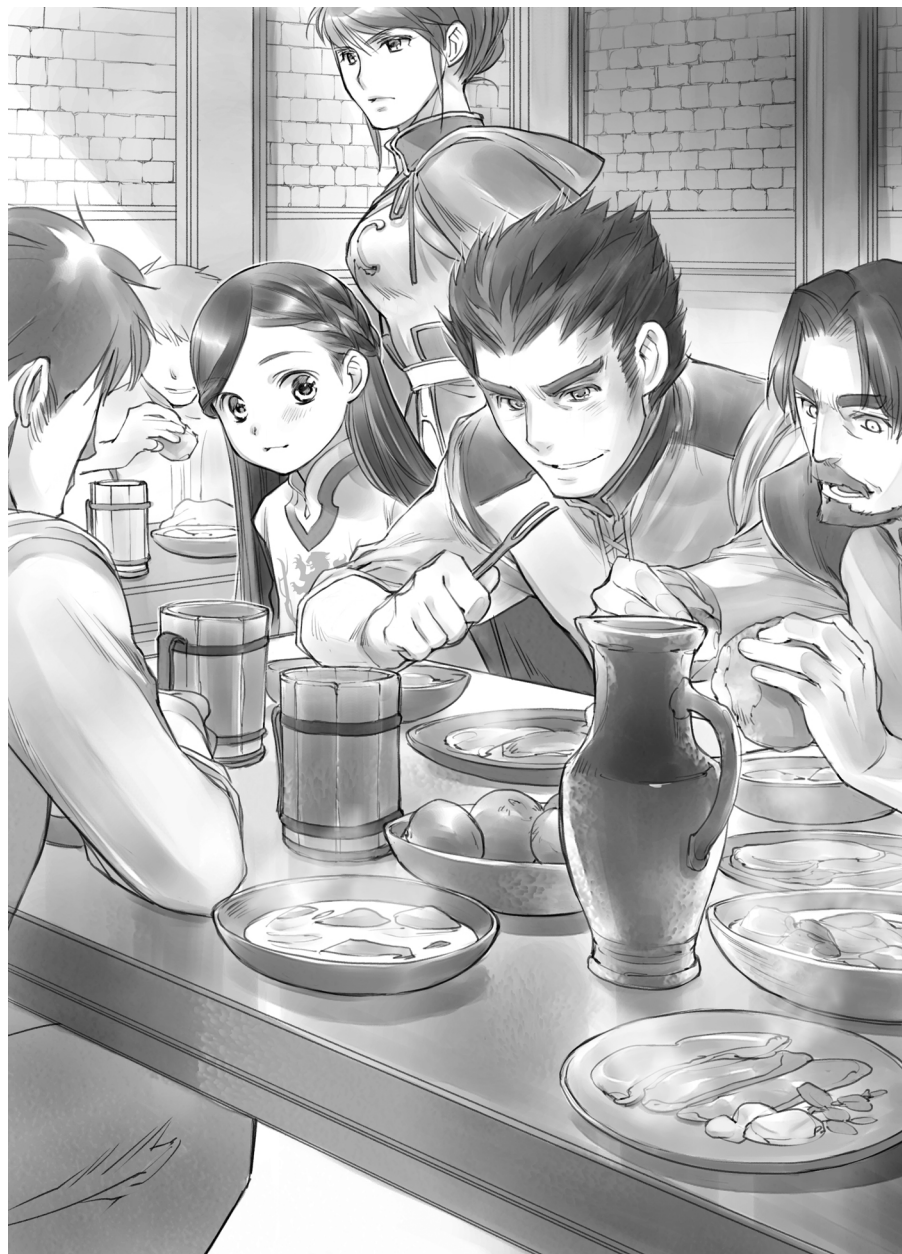
At that, the soldiers immediately dove into their plates again. While watching them snatching food from each other and the like, Dad whispered to me in a voice quiet enough to be lost among all the clamor.

“...Today’s food tastes very nostalgic. It reminds me of the first time one of my daughters cooked for me. She used lots of the wine I

had kept stashed away,” Dad said with a smile, bringing a forkful of wine-seasoned bird to his mouth.

Memories of the time I had used his stash of honey wine to cook a bird, then laughed about it with everyone at the table flashed through my mind. It was so nostalgic that tears welled up in my eyes.

...I can't let myself cry here, I thought, taking a deep breath and smiling as I held back the tears.



The Harvest Festival

When dawn broke, the monastery became a hive of activity. We would be closing it off come the end of the morning today, and so the kitchen staff were operating at full capacity to prepare breakfast and lunch while everyone hurried to finish moving things around. Breakfast was bread and soup, which was set on the tables for people to eat when they got an opportunity to.

The priests piled mattresses, cutlery, and other such basic necessities into the carriages as they cleared out their rooms. The soldiers cleaned up their own rooms and bedding themselves, while those from the Gilberta Company worked to prepare for their upcoming business. And me? I would have been nothing but an inconvenience in the midst of all that. That was why, once Monika and Gil had served Brigitte and me our food, we hid away in my room posthaste. The only thing I could do was wait for everything to be ready for me to leave.

“Lutz, I leave the workshop to you. I believe Ingo’s workshop should be finishing the materials needed for that winter handiwork soon, yes?”

“That’s right. Also, I would like to ask Ingo to improve upon the printing press. Would that be acceptable?”

“Yes, of course.”

Bring ‘em on! The more improvements, the better! I thought, and based on the wide grin that spread across Lutz’s face, he must have heard me loud and clear.

We were using the feedback from those who had experience using the printing press to determine what areas needed to be improved, so I wouldn’t be particularly helpful in that process. All I could do was encourage the gray priests to speak freely about what parts they found inconvenient, and what changes they wanted to see. After all, the printing industry wouldn’t progress if we stuck to the status quo.

“Gil, I shall entrust the temple to you in my absence. Please do what you can to help Nora and the others fit in at the orphanage,” I said.

The gray priests and shrine maidens in Hasse had taught Nora and the others enough about temple life that they now fit right in at the monastery, but the temple orphanage was filled with people they didn’t know, and they would be living among a large group rather

than being mostly among themselves. I had no doubts that bringing them to the temple would stress them out for reasons they hadn't come across here.

"As you wish."

Having entrusted the orphans to Gil, I turned to face Dad, the head of the soldiers. "...Gunther." There was a pause before I spoke, since calling him by his name was so weird to me that I had to think about it for a moment. "I entrust guarding the priests to you. I ask that you bring them all to the temple safely. It is because you have been so reliably granting my wishes that I feel at ease sending them out with you."

"You can count on me," Dad replied.

I walked over and started handing out the coins that Benno had prepared for me beforehand. "As thanks for your efforts," I said, passing them to the kneeling soldiers. The gleaming looks in their eyes was more than enough to assure me that they would take the job seriously.

And so, the party heading for Ehrenfest departed. After seeing them off, Benno and Mark made their move; they would be operating away from us to spread their rumors. They would be spending the morning doing business in Hasse, making comments along the lines of: "I hear a bunch of citizens from Hasse attacked a monastery built by the archduke. But isn't that treason? I don't know who's responsible for ordering the attack, but I can only imagine how many heads are going to roll for it..." Then, they would rush back to Ehrenfest.

"Be careful, Benno. Mark."

"We thank you for your concern," Benno and Mark replied together, before heading off toward Hasse. Not long after, my attendants and personal staff got into carriages to go to the mayor's estate.

"Monika, Nicola—please meet up with Eckhart and Justus's attendants before heading to the next winter mansion. I will be waiting here for Eckhart."

After seeing everyone off, I waited in my room in the monastery with Brigitte for Eckhart to come and get me. It was time very comfortably spent, since Ella had prepared cookies for me, sandwiches for lunch, and freshly squeezed fruit juice for me to drink.

"What is your home province like, Brigitte? I'm not too familiar with the duchy's geography yet, so I would love to hear about it," I said. In my opinion, it was easier to learn the geography of places you had actually heard locals talking about before.

Brigitte put on a troubled smile at my request for small talk. "Illgner is located in the south-west of Ehrenfest. It's a sizable but rural province, low in population without any special exports to speak

of. We have a large lumber industry, but the same could be said of all provinces in our area.”

“...If the province has so much wood, perhaps it would be suitable for making paper?”

It was possible that Illgner had a greater variety of wood than Ehrenfest, and if they were in need of a special export then paper would definitely fit the bill. The printing industry simply required a large paper supply to function, so I wanted to have a thorough discussion about what kind of trees were in the province, and whether there were any rare trees or feyplants that could produce high-quality paper like trombes could.

“For now, I need to prioritize the spread of printing throughout the archduke’s Central District, but I would like to meet Giebe Illgner one day to discuss the production of paper,” I said, and Brigitte’s amethyst eyes shone brighter than I had ever seen before.

“Oh yes, please do. I shall be eagerly waiting for the opportunity.”

We continued talking until the feystone began to shine, announcing that we had visitors. Brigitte opened the door to reveal Eckhart, Justus, Damuel, and Fran, who were all wearing tense expressions.

“Those are some scary looks on your faces. Did something happen?” I asked.

“We were just surprised to return to find the place deserted, without so much as a single attendant in sight. Where in the world did the crowd from yesterday go?”

“We’re closing the monastery for the winter, so we sent them all to Ehrenfest’s orphanage. Did my attendants not tell you when they reached the mayor’s estate?” I asked.

“Ah, I see,” Eckhart replied with a relieved sigh. They had apparently been so taken aback by the deserted monastery that they had come running straight to my room.

“Didn’t you know about this, Fran? I... Wait, hold on. You look unwell, Fran. Is everything okay?” He looked so sick that I could tell something was wrong from a glance.

As I peered at his worn-out expression, he forced a smile and said, “It’s nothing.”

“In what world is that expression nothing? We do not need to leave until noon, from what I remember. Please rest in the boys’ building until fourth bell.”

“No, I cannot rest when my mistress has no other attendants,” Fran said flatly. “Please forgive my staying.”

Eckhart nodded in approval. It seemed that everyone ended up like this when Ferdinand trained them.

...Curse you for being such a stubborn hard worker!

“I will not forgive it,” I replied. Fran must not have expected me to refuse, as he—and everyone else, for that matter—looked at me in total disbelief. “I am rumored to be deeply compassionate, and thus I order you to either sleep on this room’s bench or privately in the boys’ building. You may choose which you prefer.”

“Rozemyne, I’m not so sure about this,” Eckhart interjected.

“I shall hear what you have to say about these matters when you can manage my health, Eckhart. Fran will be serving as my representative here, and I do not wish for him to collapse from exhaustion,” I said, silencing his protests with a sharp glare. “Now then, Fran—between this bench and the boys’ dorm, which do you prefer? If you pick neither, I will have no choice but to offer you my lap as a pillow. Now choose.”

After enduring my glare for a bit, Fran conceded and reluctantly headed to the boys’ building.

“Rozemyne,” Eckhart began, “you may not understand this very well yet, but—”

“No, dear brother, *you* are the one who does not yet understand. To speak frankly, were I to collapse, you and Fran would be perfectly capable of taking my place,” I began. Any noble could give the same blessings I was. The only thing they lacked were priest robes, but putting Eckhart in long white or blue robes before sending him onto the stage would be enough to make him look just like a priest from a distance. “But nobody can take Fran’s place. Monika and Nicola are not yet capable of doing all the work of an attendant, and Fran is the only one who can help me with the rituals, manage my health, handle the potions, and accompany me on matters without offending nobles such as Justus and yourself.”

“But attendants are—” Eckhart began, only to be interrupted by Justus.

“Enough with the sibling bickering already. You lost, Eckhart. Get over it. Lady Rozemyne’s got a point here. ‘Course, considering her position, you have a point as well. How’re you gonna live when you’re even more hardheaded than Ferdinand?”

Justus scolded me for not having an attendant with me despite my high status, and Eckhart for not adapting to the situation. He was a bit eccentric about it, but he clearly had experience-driven wisdom. Both Eckhart and I had no choice but to apologize.

As we waited for fourth bell, Eckhart and Justus updated me on how the Harvest Festival was going. When the bell finally rang, the door opened immediately and Fran walked in as though he had been waiting right outside. The exhaustion was mostly gone from his face, though, which was a huge relief.

After eating a lunch of sandwiches with fruit juice, we closed up

the monastery and departed. The mayonnaise in the sandwiches had been enough to bring a glint to Justus's eyes, but when he asked for more information, I went ahead and told him that the recipe would be expensive since I was even charging Sylvester for it. But that wasn't enough to make him give in; clearly desperate, he even started saying that he'd pay as soon as we got home. I simply put on a smile, deflecting him by saying that I only took up-front payments. An information nut like him would no doubt prove to be a valuable customer.

Once we were in the Pandabus, Fran gave me a report on Hasse. "As ordered, I made their blood run cold. Richt looked as though his face had turned to stone."

There was nothing we could do now but watch and see how Hasse handled the situation.

We arrived at the next winter mansion where farmers gathered. The Harvest Festival there began just as it had in Hasse. Once I was on the stage, the same ceremonies were performed, and the same cheers arose at the blessings. Afterward, I was given a chance to watch a game of warf, the sport I had missed seeing yesterday at Hasse.

While the mayor here was busy explaining the rules, food was set on the tables in front of us. There were a lot more tables set up throughout the plaza, but none had food on them yet. I could imagine that we nobles would eat first, then everyone else would eat once we were done.

Once Fran had finished his poison-tests, I started eating the various different foods. I could tell that freshly harvested ingredients had most likely been used, and the flavor was simple but solid.

"Now... begin!" the mayor announced, and an animal that had been brought to the center of the plaza was instantly thrown against the ground. The second it struck the dirt, it curled up into a ball like an armadillo or a pill bug.

"Bwuh?!"

The animal bounced across the field, followed by a crowd of players racing after it. One of them then kicked it, sending it rolling across the ground. They were using it as the ball in their game.

Seeing them kick the animal made me flinch. "H-Hold on. That's animal abuse, isn't it?"

"Oh, are you unfamiliar? Warfs are a type of feybeast," the mayor explained. "Their hides are strong enough that no amount of kicking would be enough to kill them."

In my opinion, any game where you kicked an animal was messed up, regardless of whether it was likely to die or not. But those were morals that didn't apply here. I had no choice but to keep my thoughts

to myself—when in Rome, after all.

This game of kicking a warf around was strikingly similar to soccer. A rough line had been drawn down the center of the court, with each team also halving their own side. Another line was then drawn to mark the furthest quarter of each side. A loop had then been placed at the far end of each half, and getting the warf into that loop scored a point.

It was similar to soccer in how you had to kick the warf until you reached the goal, but here, once you reached the final quarter of each side, you could pick the warf up with your hands and set or slam it down into the loop. In that regard, it was more like rugby or handball.

Holding it in your hands without kicking it encouraged the warf to show its head, but that was considered a foul, and you'd have to give the warf to the other team. To avoid that, you had to keep hitting the warf by either bouncing it against the ground or passing it to your teammates on your way to the goal.

"Eep! Th-That looks like it hurt," I observed.

Tackling and pushing seemed to be par for the course, and as far as I could tell, there weren't any rules on that at all. People pulled each other, snatched away the warf, and even kicked people who had been pushed to the ground.

"People may get hurt, but that shouldn't be an issue since the farm work is already over," Eckhart said. "Not to mention, this is an important sport that determines the hierarchy in the winter mansion. Why *wouldn't* everyone be this enthusiastic?"

The players were apparently the representatives of their towns, and they competed once a year with their honor on the line.

"I understand their enthusiasm, but I must say, it's quite frightening."

"So you say, but this is much safer than ditter," Eckhart replied, watching the game of warf.

I had never heard the word "ditter" before. It was probably some other kind of sport.

"What's ditter?"

"A sport played all the time at the Royal Academy. Apprentice knights ride their highbeasts and fight as a form of training, but since it's done in the air, it's fairly dangerous. Lord Ferdinand was a master of the sport—a high-level player who employed the most devious tactics. I can't even count the number of times he defeated an opponent with wit and guile..." Eckhart said proudly.

That was when a louder cheer ran through the crowd. It seemed that the winner had been decided, and meat was gifted to the winning town.

Once the passionate game of warf calmed down, more and more

food had started being set on the tables. The children excitedly carried some off while the adults started pouring beer. Soon, the sky began to darken, and the temperature dropped. Fran put a warm coat over me the moment I started to shiver from the cool autumn breeze; Monika had apparently brought it for me.

Is there anything my attendants can't do?

In the center of the plaza where the farmers had played warf, there was now a fire providing warmth and light. It wasn't as big as a bonfire, but it was decently sized, and the feast began under its warm glow. The mayor celebrated everyone's year of hard work and spoke of the upcoming winter, to which everyone toasted and began eating boisterously.

In the meantime, since we nobles and the city officials had already finished eating, we discussed taxes and the food that would be paid to the duchy. The mayor and his officials were wearing bright expressions, since this was their first good harvest in many years. I didn't know how large it had been last year, but I was glad to see them so happy about the larger harvest that my blessing at this year's Spring Prayer had provided.

Justus was at the center of the tax discussion. His work as a tax official would apparently begin first thing tomorrow morning, and he had said that I would need to join him since part of the taxes would be going to me.

"Lady Rozemyne, you can wait until you've finished eating breakfast," he said.

Even when the sun fell over the horizon and everything went dark, the festival didn't end. People cleared the tables with full bellies, leaving only beer and some light snacks, while musicians with instruments came out and started to play.

The stars of this year's festival—the newlyweds—were the first ones to come out to dance. They were soon joined by more boys and girls holding hands. Some were small children who had just been baptized, and others were young couples embarrassed about being teased. People clapped, whistled, and stomped their feet in celebration. Cheers and loud singing echoed through the air, with everyone yelling their appreciation for the harvest. It was the kind of festival where it was easy to find yourself absorbed in all the smiles, passion, and energy.

The Harvest Festival ended when seventh bell rang. The kids were taken away to sleep, the girls helped clean everything up, and the boys hurriedly secured as much beer as possible to drink back in their rooms.

"High Bishop, in the interests of deepening our bond, may I offer you—" the mayor began.

“Lady Rozemyne will be heading to her room now. We will accompany you in her stead,” Eckhart said, having been instructed by Ferdinand to take my place when the mayor and other officials tried inviting me to Bribe City. At his encouragement, I retreated with Fran and Brigitte to the room prepared for me.

As Monika and Nicola prepared my bed and a hot bath, I listened to them talk about the Harvest Festival they had experienced. It was the first Harvest Festival of their lives, and from what I heard, it had been filled with fun and surprising things for them.

Justus began his work as a tax official first thing in the morning. He made sure everything that had been discussed during the festival had been handed over, then spread out a large cloth with a sizable magic circle drawn on it over the stage from yesterday. He placed feystones on the four corners, put the taxed goods in the center, then waved his schtappe through the air and chanted something.

In an instant, the goods were enveloped in light and disappeared.

“So all of that is being sent to Ehrenfest?”

“That’s right. This will be your portion, Lady Rozemyne,” Justus said, before sending the tithe that I would be receiving to the castle. My share of the goods had been marked as such, and since I had given real blessings at the Harvest Festival, I was receiving more than last year as thanks. “Other blue priests and shrine maidens will need to have their noble family members retrieve the goods from the castle, but in your case, your family is already in the castle, so the court chefs will prepare the food for winter ahead of time. All you need to do is ask my mother or Norbert to prepare a carriage to carry it all to the temple.”

“That’s very convenient. I’ll have to ask Rihyarda to prepare a carriage when I return.”

When Justus had finished with the taxes, we left for the next winter mansion. The attendants departed in their carriages, and since we could catch up in no time on highbeast, we were able to leisurely rest until noon.

Aah, the Harvest Festival sure is fun.

...Or so I thought until the third day. It was exhausting being in the middle of energetic festivals day after day. To each new city, this was a one-day-a-year event, but we were stuck in the madness for ten days straight. I yearned for the quiet, uneventful days of yore.

...I want to go back to the temple and lock myself in the book room. Someone, give me some reading time. PLEASE!

The Night of Schutzaria

Just as I was really getting exhausted from the quick succession of festivals, we arrived at Dorvan—a small city with a winter mansion, located further south than any other city I was visiting for the Harvest Festival. A forest located by one of the surrounding farming towns contained the autumn material ruelle, which was a key ingredient in the jureve potion I needed.

There was a full moon on the Night of Schutzaria, and it was a night that supposedly had more autumn mana than any other. A ruelle gathered then would apparently be the best autumn material we could harvest within Ehrenfest, but that was still two days away.

After informing Dorvan's mayor that we would be staying for a few days after the Harvest Festival, we returned some of the food given to us as taxes as payment for our stay.

It seemed that everyone else was fairly exhausted from the fervor of all the festivals as well. This was the perfect time to get some rest, and so I drank some energy potions and slept soundly to recover. I also spent my break checking out the winter mansion, walking around the grounds while considering whether it could function as a temporary temple classroom.

I opened up the picture book Fran had read during the baptism and read it aloud again. This time, not just the baptized kids, but all the kids nearby listened intently. There really wasn't much to do during the winter, and if we handled this right, I got the impression that it would be easy to raise the literacy rates in farming towns.

"Tonight is the Night of Schutzaria. Nap well this afternoon, Lady Rozemyne. The ruelle ripens from the full moon's light, so the harvesting will continue late into the night," Justus explained as we ate breakfast together. He, Damuel, and Eckhart would be going to look for a ruelle tree after lunch. They would mark it while it was bright outside, then come back and wait for the moon to rise before leaving again with me.

"Okay. Preparing everything sounds like a lot of work, but I trust you to do it well."

In order to avoid being dead weight when the time came, I took a nap as requested. I slept so much that I wasn't particularly hungry when I woke up later that evening, but I started eating dinner

nonetheless.

“We found a tree and can leave as soon as night comes. Are you feeling up to it, Rozemyne?” Eckhart asked.

“Yes. I’m feeling fine,” I replied.

An ordonnanz came flying into the room just as we were finishing dinner.

It landed on Eckhart’s arm, then started to speak in Ferdinand’s voice. There had apparently been an issue with his schedule which meant he wouldn’t be able to join us.

Eckhart let out a disappointed sigh, then whipped out his schtappe to remake the ordonnanz and send a response. “We found a ruelle tree without issue and shall gather the ruelle tonight as planned. Justus will gather some for you as well, Lord Ferdinand.”

I went to my room to change clothes after dinner, putting on a simple, undecorated dress made out of particularly firm fabric. Underneath this I was wearing the same kind of pants that female knights wore so that I wouldn’t need to worry about my skirt lifting up.

“This isn’t very cute, is it?” Nicola asked, the disappointment clear in her voice.

Monika, on the other hand, shared Wilma’s love of simple things. She shook her head. “Decoration isn’t necessary when gathering in the woods, Nicola. What matters most is wearing something that is easy to move in. Isn’t that right, Lady Rozemyne?”

“Exactly. The last thing I need are frills getting in my way tonight.”

They rubbed a layer of gel into my hair to keep it together, then bundled it all up in a ponytail. Then, they switched out the short shoes I wore when walking around the winter mansion for knee-high leather boots that were perfect for moving through a forest. I could feel a burst of glee each time they tightened the strings.

...It’s been a long time since I’ve been to a forest, and even longer since I’ve done some gathering! I need to put my all into this!

Since entering the temple, I had barely ever gone to the forest. Apprentice blue shrine maidens were forbidden from doing work on their own, and my attendants—Fran especially—were opposed to me going to the forest at all. Not to mention that, even when I wanted to go, my stamina would end up making me dead weight to everyone else. In the end, I had always just stayed at the temple, watching Lutz and Gil head off to the forest as part of the workshop’s paper-making process. And now that I was the archduke’s adopted daughter, I spent all of my time traveling between the temple and the castle.

Aaah, I’m so excited!

Once my boots were on, I stood up and let my attendants put a

leather belt around my waist. It had pouches with gathering gloves and space for the materials, plus a container for me to put a feystone in. They also put a second leather belt on me, this one holding the knife magic tool that Ferdinand had prepared for me. As far as I was aware, that was all I needed for the gathering.

I looked down at the knife and all the gathering tools on my belt and giggled to myself. I might not have had any armor like Brigitte did, but my outfit definitely looked pretty cool and heroic.

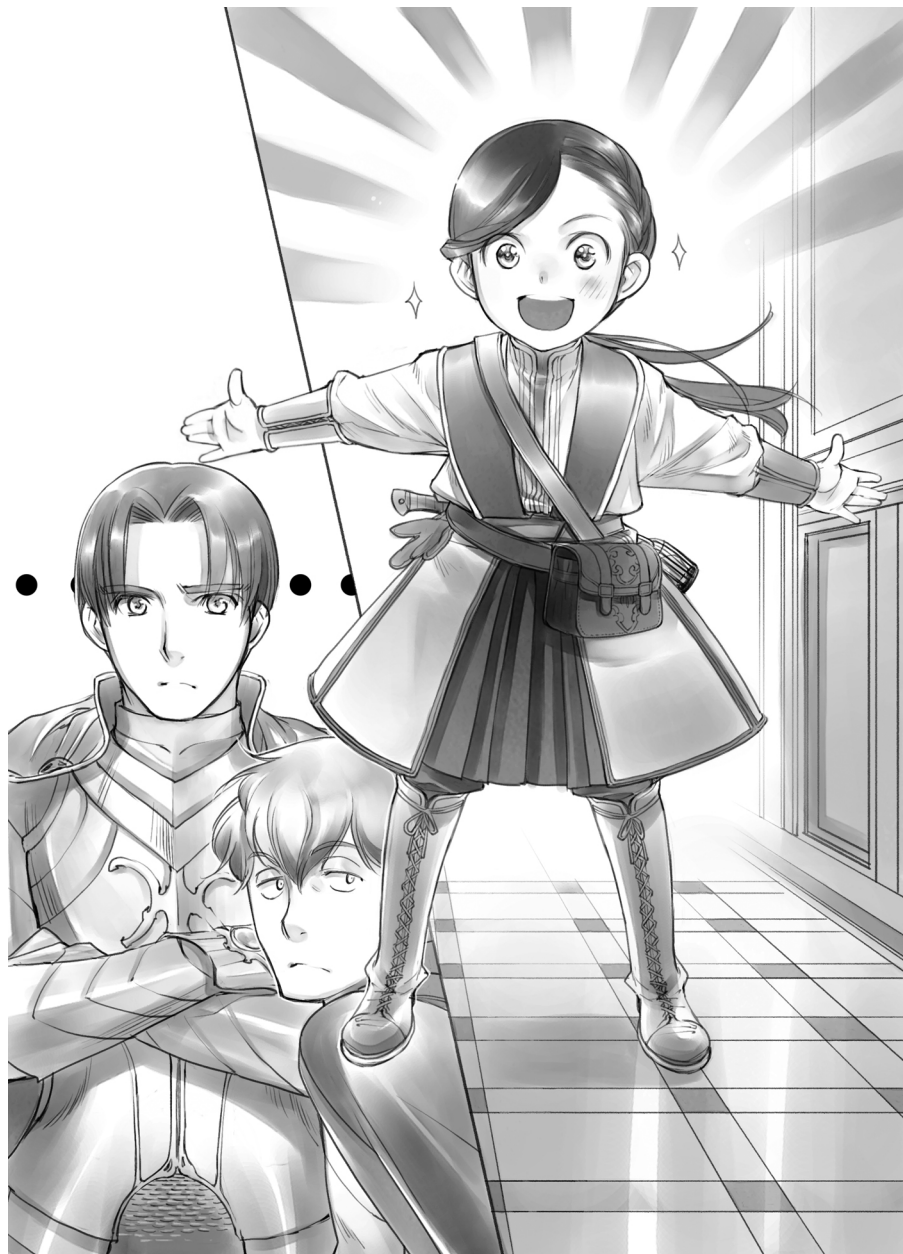
“How do I look, Monika? Nicola?”

“I think you look wonderfully capable,” Monika said calmly.

Nicola, in contrast, clenched a fist and looked at me with unmistakable excitement in her eyes. “You look super strong, Lady Rozemyne! And so cool!”

Pleased that Nicola had given me the praise I was looking for, I exited my room and headed to where everyone else was waiting.

“Eckhart, don’t I look like the strongest girl you’ve ever seen?” I asked, spreading my arms so that he and the others could see.



Eckhart widened his eyes, then shook his head with a very disappointed expression. "You must not do anything but gather the ruelle. Understand?" he said, as if speaking to a child who always refused to listen.

"...Fine."

Once everyone was ready, we went out. I had expected it to be a bit brighter thanks to the full moon, but it was actually pretty dark. I looked up in confusion and saw that the moon was a different color than I had ever seen it before.

"I-I-Is it just me, or is the moon purple right now?!" I yelped, pointing up at the night sky. I was kind of creeped out by the color, but everyone else simply glanced up without so much as a reaction.

"It is the Night of Schutzaria," Justus said with a shrug.

Meanwhile, Eckhart was giving me a surprised look. "Have you never seen this before, Rozemyne?"

"Never. I don't usually go outside when it's this late, and in the autumn, I'm usually bedridden," I explained. But even then, I had lived in this world for three years now, and not once had anyone mentioned anything about the moon turning purple.

"The weather gets much colder after the Night of Schutzaria, so it's said to be the day when Ewigeliebe the God of Life's power finally surpasses that of Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind. In contrast, the moon is dyed red on the Night of Flutrane at the start of spring. Since this is when the snow begins to melt, it is said to be the day when Flutrane the Goddess of Water's power finally surpasses that of Ewigeliebe the God of Life."

Tonight apparently wasn't the only night that the moon changed color. It happened every year when the seasons changed, and since the relative strengthening of mana had nothing to do with poor commoners in the lower city, I concluded that my family simply hadn't bothered telling me while I was bedridden with a fever.

"Lady Rozemyne, ruelles bloom beneath the light of the full moon. Now should be a good time to begin," Justus said before producing his highbeast, hopping on, and flying away.

I did the same, following after him while looking uncomfortably at the shining purple moon. Brigitte and Damuel were on either side of me, while Eckhart followed from behind.

We passed over the farming town, which was deserted now that everyone was traveling to the winter mansion, and advanced into the woods until we found the tree that Justus had mentioned at dinner. He had flown into the woods without any hesitation whatsoever thanks to knowing exactly where to go, though, despite him mentioning marking the tree, I had no idea how he found it.

“Lady Rozemyne, that is a ruelle tree,” Justus said.

The tree was tall and without leaves, instead having metallic branches from which dozens of flowers similar to white magnolias had bloomed. Each one exuded a powerful aroma.

“The flower petals will peel off from the outside as the full moon shines on them, and the ruelle within will grow. It will be some time before they fully ripen,” he explained.

I nodded, driving Lessy closer to one of the flowers. The smell grew even stronger as I approached, so I closed my eyes and slowly inhaled the sweet scent. It was, in a word, enrapturing.

“Would the flower petals make good materials, too? I think you could make a really nice perfume out of them,” I said.

Justus looked over the flowers with narrowed eyes. “Hm. Gotta say, I didn’t know ruelles gave off such a strong smell. The Night of Schutzaria might have a different effect on them than other full moons. Heck, let’s try it. I’ll grab one to take back,” he said, sounding more like he was having a conversation with himself than actually answering me. He excitedly pulled out his schtappe and, after muttering about how these ruelles were nothing like the ones he had seen before, chanted “*messer*.”

Justus pulled his highbeast over, his schtappe now in the shape of a knife. He stood up on his stirrups and began cutting branches to retrieve some of the flowers. From there, he trimmed away any unimportant branch parts, leaving behind only the branches connected to flowers, which he delicately put into his pouches.

“Justus, I want to try that, too.”

“Huh? A-Ah, right. Forgive me, Lady Rozemyne,” he replied, raising his head with an awkward look before immediately putting on a noble smile. It seemed that he had completely forgotten about everyone else, becoming entirely absorbed in his own little hobby. “In that case, please fortify your knife with mana and attempt to cut the branches as I did.”

“Okay!” I exclaimed, copying Justus and moving to cut a branch with the knife that Ferdinand had given me. It was a bit of a dry run, but I needed to confirm whether I could gather things with my own strength or not.

With my knife magic tool in my right hand, I brought Lessy within touching distance of a flower and then leaned out the window. I gripped a thin branch in one hand and pressed the mana-filled knife against it. For a second, my heart pounded with worry over whether or not it would actually cut, but the knife slid through the branch like butter.

“Wow. It went through so easily...” I murmured, looking at the ruelle branch in one hand and the knife magic tool in the other. The

knife was very respectable, allowing even someone as weak as me to cut through a branch without using much mana.

I'm sure I would have actually been useful in the forest back home if I had one of these with me, I thought, discarding the excess branches and putting the gathered flowers into one of my pouches.

"Whew. Looks like you'll do just fine with the gathering," Eckhart said, having apparently been a little worried that I wouldn't be able to handle it myself.

"Lady Rozemyne, gathering the fruit will be done the same way. You need only cut the branches off so that only the fruit remains," Justus explained.

"Okay. I know what to do now," I replied, letting out a sigh of relief. It seemed that I wouldn't have any issues gathering the ruelle after all.

"...Oh, the flowers."

Having apparently received enough moonlight, the sizable flower petals began to scatter. They peeled off one by one, fluttering away in the breeze and twirling down to the ground like leaves on the wind. The moment they touched the ground, they disappeared as if becoming one with the forest floor, an ephemeral expression of beauty that I couldn't take my eyes off of.

The magical sight didn't last long at all. Before I knew it, the petals were all gone, and there wasn't a single flower left on the branches. But there were small purple crystals that looked just like amethysts the size of my little finger now growing in their place.

"Those are the ruelle fruits. They grow to be about this big when exposed to a full moon," Justus said, holding his thumb and pointer finger about ten centimeters apart. His lips then curled into a tight frown as he looked at the ruelle. "Pretty sure these were light yellow when I gathered 'em before. First time I'm seein' them be all purple," he continued, clearly absorbed in his own thoughts. It was easy to tell since his tone had completely changed.

"Does the fruit change color based on the color of the moon?"

"They just might. I'm gonna grab some as well for my report to Lord Ferdinand. Er... That is, if you would allow me to do so, Lady Rozemyne."

"If they're for your report and research, then I don't see why not," I replied. "Just don't gather them all, I guess?"

But my conversation with Justus on the other side of the ruelle branch was cut short by the sound of grass rustling—footsteps, coming this way. And not just one or two pairs of footsteps, either. The very moment I concluded that there must have been dozens upon dozens of them at the least, I saw a group of animals—some looking like large cats, others like squirrels—leap from the bushes and come rushing this

way. They were small fluffy animals not even tall enough to reach Damuel's knees, but their red eyes gleaming eerily in the darkness immediately removed all notions that they were cute.

"Feybeasts!" Eckhart shouted, whipping out his schtappe and transforming it into a spear shape before leaping from his descending highbeast.

Using the momentum from his fall, he thrust his spear through a rabbit-like feybeast that had horns in place of ears. The spear pierced through its stomach and out its back, revealing a glittering jewel stuck into its tip. A second later, the rabbit shape melted and disappeared into nothingness, while the jewel was absorbed into the spear.

"They don't seem very strong at a glance, but there are lots of them. Eliminate every last one!"

"Yes, sir!"

Damuel and Brigitte similarly leapt off their highbeasts, whipping out their schtappes and transforming them into their preferred weaponry. With one swing after another, they began mowing down the feybeasts.

"Eckhart! There are more coming!" I cried.

Since I was still riding my highbeast high in the air, I could see the feybeasts swarming around the tree. There were more gleaming eyes in the bushes than I could hope to count, all looking our way with clear malice. A shiver ran down my spine at the sheer hostility in the air.

"Rozemyne, do not descend from your highbeast no matter what! Prioritize the gathering above all else!"

Surrounding the ruelle tree with their backs to it, the three knights raised their weapons and began cutting down the horde. They swung their spears, knocking some feybeasts aside and stabbing others to death. Some melted away to nothingness, while others lay limp across the ground.

"Eep?!"

The horde of feybeasts swarmed the limp ones and quickly began devouring them. Seeing them prioritize eating each other over the armed knights gave me goosebumps.

When the horde eventually spread out again, all of the limp feybeasts were gone. In their place was a single feybeast, now much larger than the others.

"Damuel! Always aim for the feystone, even with the weaker feybeasts! If other feybeasts eat the weaker ones, the fight will only get harder for us!" Eckhart yelled, which was enough for me to piece together that feybeasts grew from eating feystones. And the larger feybeast was eating the weaker ones around it to grow even bigger.

Upon hearing Eckhart's warning, Damuel hurriedly stabbed the

larger feybeast with his spear over and over until, finally, he managed to pierce the feystone. It seemed that things weren't so easy for him, especially when the feybeasts could grow stronger through cannibalism. But above all else, it was clear that he was being pushed much, much harder than Brigitte and Eckhart.

"I-I need to do something... But what?" In a panic, I racked my mind for something I could do, but Justus simply shook his head.

"There is nothing you can do, milady."

So he said, but I still wanted to help. I thought as hard as I could, trying not to let the fear of being eaten by feybeasts overwhelm me. But when it came to battles, all I could do was pray to the gods.

"Wh-What about a shield? I could surround the tree with Schutzaria's shield and stop the feybeasts from entering! That would give them time to heal, and—"

"No! A mana shield would stop the full moon's light from reaching the tree! All of our efforts will have been for nothing if we can't gather the ruelle," Justus said, leading me to bite my lip. "Milady, you need only think of the gathering. Leave the fighting to the knights."

He was right. The smart course of action would be to let the experts do their jobs. But a seemingly endless stream of feybeasts were pouring from the bushes, and the three knights were being hopelessly overwhelmed.

"Justus, do feybeasts always swarm in hordes like this?"

"No, there were almost no feybeasts at all on the full moon I gathered ruelles on. This is abnormal. Ferdinand mentioned that the Night of Schutzaria was special, correct? An enormous amount of mana must be contained within the fruits to attract so many feybeasts. But suffice to say... we did not expect nearly this many to come," Justus said through gritted teeth, making it clear that he was conflicted about the current situation.

My gathering was the top priority here, and all we could do was watch as the ruelles slowly continued to grow. But their growth was so painfully slow that it was actually frustrating.

"Justus, how much longer will this take?!" Eckhart cried from below, panic in his voice.

Justus answered in a growl, still glaring at the ruelles. "They aren't even halfway to full size yet!"

"More feybeasts than we can count are targeting the ruelles! There's no end to them!"

Out of all three knights, Damuel had the least mana and was visibly struggling the most. His shoulders were heaving as he gasped for air. He was probably getting exhausted faster since he had to compensate for his lack of mana with raw physical strength.

"Justus, if we can't use the shield since it would block mana, then

what about a prayer of divine protection? Can I pray to Angriff the God of War and give them a blessing?"

Justus swung his head to look at me as though he had completely forgotten I could do that, then nodded with gleaming eyes. "Yes, that would be perfectly safe. Please bless them, milady."

"O God of War Angriff, of the God of Fire Leidenschaft's exalted twelve, I pray that you grant them your divine protection," I prayed, focusing mana into my ring.

The blue light of the blessing scattered around the tree, raining down upon the three knights. Instantly, everything about their fighting changed; they were moving visibly faster and more nimbly than before, even cutting down more feybeasts at once as though their weapons had become sharper.

"Lady Rozemyne, this divine protection is magnificent!" Brigitte exclaimed. It was clear from her tone that she was beyond elated, and there was a gleam in her amethyst eyes as she glanced over her surroundings. All of a sudden, she bent her knees, her skirt flourishing as she quickly changed position. At first, I didn't understand why she had changed her stance, but then she suddenly swung a long glaive—a pole weapon with a slightly curved blade at the end.

"HYAAAH!" she roared, her weapon whistling as it cut through the air.

Every feybeast in her path instantly broke apart and melted away. Nearby feybeasts began to swarm around the weakened ones that had survived the blow, but Brigitte readied her weapon once more and took a step toward them.

"BEGONE!" she roared again, stomping the ground as she swung her weapon down. Its long blade flashed, cutting the entire group to pieces in an instant. Seeing her continually swing her blade without pause was beyond heroic, and reminded me that Karstedt had mentioned she had more mana than Damuel.

"This will make things easier," Eckhart said, now having a much less arduous time killing the feybeasts with Damuel.

"Lady Rozemyne, please firmly grasp this ruelle and pour mana into it. Continue to do so until its color changes completely," Justus said, pointing out a now large ruelle.

I responded with a nod, still distracted by what was going on beneath us.

"Milady, their job is to hunt the feybeasts within the duchy. You need not fear for them," Justus continued, giving me a firm look. "Please focus on your gathering. Their fight will not end until you've finished."

I nodded again, then reached out to grasp the sizable ruelle. Just as its crystalline appearance implied, it was hard and smooth to the

touch.

I need to get this over with as quickly as possible.

The knights had to keep fighting until my gathering was complete. I glared at the ruelle in front of me as I started pouring my mana into it, but unlike the feystone I used to make Lessy, I had a hard time actually getting my mana to go in. I could feel resistance, as though it didn't want foreign mana inside it.

"You feel so much resistance because the feyplant is alive. You wouldn't want the mana of others inside of you, would you?" Justus explained.

That made sense. I could remember how gross it felt when Ferdinand tried pouring mana into me to cure my wounds during the trombe extermination.

"Milady, I will gather some of the others while keeping watch," Justus said, putting on his own mana-blocking gloves and collecting a bunch of still-pure ruelles for his own purposes. He was finished in no time at all since he didn't need to dye them with his mana.

I squeezed the crystalline ruelle in my hands, continuing to pour mana into it. Sweat was beading on my forehead despite it being a cool autumn night. The purple fruit started turning a faint yellow as I repeatedly bombarded it with mana, trying to overwhelm its resistance.

...Just a little more.

As I was gripping the fruit, one of the squirrel-like feybeasts evaded the knights' attacks and started rushing up the tree, but Justus quickly kicked it down for Damuel to finish off. It hadn't managed to hurt me or anything, but I was completely immobile while gripping the ruelle, and that knowledge filled me with an indescribable sense of dread.

I kept pouring my mana into the fruit, chanting *Hurry up!* in my head.

"Justus! Is this enough? Is it dyed completely?"

"Absolutely. Please take it."

After checking with Justus that the fruit had finished changing color, I took out my knife and cut the branch it was attached to. "Got it!"

"Alright, everyone! Retreat!" Eckhart roared, his voice echoing through the forest.

Just as I started to relax a little, there was a loud screech, and a cat-like feybeast that had climbed another tree leapt toward me. Its mouth was open so wide that it looked like its jaw could dislocate at any moment. With its gleaming teeth bared and its sharp claws protruded, the creature lunged at me.

"Eep?!" I defensively crossed my arms in front of my face and

closed my eyes tight.

“Milady!” Justus whipped the feybeast down with his schtappe just as I felt a jolt go through my hands. I reflexively opened my eyes and saw the feybeast falling to the ground, with my ruelle in its mouth.

“My ruelle!” I cried, immediately trying to follow it with Lessy, but Justus stopped me with a sharp yell.

“No, milady! Eckhart, get away!”

Eckhart had tried flying after the feybeast himself, but before it even touched the ground, it exploded. Or... that’s what it looked like, anyway.

Aftermath

As it turned out, the feybeast hadn't exploded at all. Instead, it had grown more than ten times its size in an instant, going from being knee-high to towering above us. It was so large, in fact, that I was beneath its head even while flying through the air. It fully eclipsed the moon, casting a shadow over us all.

"A goltze?!" Eckhart, who had been racing toward the feybeast to retrieve the ruelle, immediately jumped back and got on his highbeast. Damuel and Brigitte did the same, looking up at the feybeast with awe.

"What's a goltze?" I asked.

"A higher evolution of a zantze, but this is my first time actually seeing that evolution happen," Justus said.

The cat-like feybeasts that had attacked us were apparently called zantzes, and by absorbing mana, it had evolved through multiple forms until eventually becoming a goltze. A zantze would normally get bigger by eating ruelles and other feybeasts, but they would at most evolve into a fetze, which was the next evolutionary stage. It wasn't scientific Darwinism, but the terminology made sense nonetheless.

"This must have happened because it absorbed your mana, milady. But this degree of evolution would normally be unthinkable."

The two-story-tall goltze began to sluggishly move. It opened its enormous mouth wide, then began eating all the smaller feybeasts around it. These smaller feybeasts were thrown into a panic from the sudden appearance of an overwhelmingly strong goltze. Some immediately fled, while others tried devouring those around them for even a fraction of extra strength, which quickly descended into chaos.

"*Ordonnanz*," Justus said, creating an *ordonnanz* to send Ferdinand an urgent request for help. "Lord Ferdinand, a zantze has eaten the ruelle filled with Lady Rozemyne's mana and evolved into a goltze. It needs to be exterminated post haste. I request immediate assistance from the Knight's Order."

Listening to Justus's report with gritted teeth, Eckhart turned his schtappe into a sizable dual-handed claymore. Justus looked between him and the blade, then narrowed his eyes.

"Eckhart, can you handle it?"

"I can't say for sure until I try. Due to how sudden the evolution

was, the goltze won't have a proper grasp on its mana and size. If I'm going to attack, it has to be now while it's still slow to move."

Eckhart glared at the goltze, not taking his eyes off it for even a second as he poured mana into his claymore. The creature was licking up the smaller feybeasts with its massive tongue, wrapping them up and bringing them into its mouth. Eckhart flew his highbeast over its head, looking down all the while, then swung his blade.

"HYAAAH!"

A dazzling beam of light shot from his blade toward the goltze. It looked like the exact same attack that Karstedt had used back when we were ambushed during Spring Prayer, especially since Eckhart and Karstedt looked so alike. Though Eckhart's attack did seem weaker.

Noticing the dazzling light quickly closing in on it, the goltze looked up, just in time for the slash to strike it across the face. It roared in pain and anger, revealing that the attack was in fact enough to damage it. But there was no longer any question that Eckhart wouldn't be able to defeat it alone.

Still, encouraged by having done some damage, Eckhart swung his claymore once more. The smaller feybeasts retreated into the bushes, either afraid of the light or of getting wrapped up in the battle.

In the midst of all that, Justus began grabbing ruelle after ruelle, firing out instructions as he did so. "Brigitte, Damuel! Take Lady Rozemyne and flee at once! Stand by at the farming town!"

With Brigitte taking the lead, I soared away on my highbeast. We passed over the forest and returned to the deserted farming town, where we stopped and turned around. Even from there, we could tell that the goltze was still rampaging thanks to the unnatural shaking of the trees.

...Well, what do we do now?

Beating small zantzes was a piece of cake since they posed so little threat, but a goltze was too much even for an archnoble knight like Eckhart to kill. The problem here was obviously my mana—I only ever used it when I was too mad to think or when I was giving blessings, so I'd never had any opportunity to observe its size from an objective standpoint.

Ferdinand had talked a lot about how I needed to learn to control my mana—that I needed to keep myself protected from it since there was so much, and that he needed to make sure I didn't pose a threat to the duchy. But I had never actually understood what he meant. I hadn't been able to truly gauge how considerable my mana really was until now.

"...I didn't know my mana could do that to a feybeast. This is all my fault, isn't it?"

"No, Lady Rozemyne, it is our fault for failing to protect you,"

Brigitte said flatly, causing Damuel to clutch his stomach out of stress as he gazed into the forest.

“What should we do now?” I asked. “We can’t just leave the goltze here.”

“Lady Rozemyne, leave this matter to the Knight’s Order. This is why it exists,” Brigitte declared proudly, puffing out her chest ever so slightly. But judging by how ineffective Eckhart’s attack had been, I wasn’t so optimistic.

“Look, Lady Rozemyne—Lord Eckhart is returning. Everything should be okay now,” she said. And indeed, two highbeasts maneuvered out of the trees and came flying toward us. It was Justus and Eckhart.

Just as they reached us, an ordonnanz arrived. It landed on Justus’s arm, then spoke in Ferdinand’s voice. “I am heading there at once. Raise a rott. We need to deal with the goltze before it causes any collateral damage. First, Eckhart should attack the beast. Should that not be enough to kill it, Rozemyne will need to make a reverse shield of Wind, forming a cage that the feybeast cannot escape from. Rozemyne, out of all those present, only you are capable of containing a feybeast that has consumed your mana.”

The ordonnanz repeated Ferdinand’s message three times, then reverted to its feystone form. Damuel immediately took out his schtappe and said “*rott*,” sending a beam of red light shooting up into the sky.

“Make a cage out of Wind...? Is such a thing even possible?” Eckhart murmured.

“He told me how to do it—I just need to reverse how a Wind shield normally works,” I said. “I guess this is my mess, so I need to clean up the aftermath myself.”

There was a chance that this situation could happen again during future gathering missions if we encountered another feybeast swarm, or if a feystone filled with my mana ended up getting taken, so I needed to learn how to deal with this kind of problem sooner rather than later. And in all honesty, I wasn’t feeling too nervous about it, since Ferdinand had advised me on what to do. This was a problem caused by my mana, and I felt better helping to fix it than just waiting for someone else to do everything for me.

“Easier said than done, Rozemyne. Just how much mana do you think that small body of yours contains? You blessed multiple knights and poured so much into a ruelle. How could you ever have enough left to pray to the gods for a shield of Wind? It’s reckless,” Eckhart said, dismissively shaking his head.

I had more than enough mana in me to make a shield of Wind, but for most people, that was apparently reckless to the point of

danger. In other words, not many people had been informed of just how much mana I really had. Everyone knew that I had a lot thanks to the blessings I gave during the baptism ceremonies, but they didn't know exactly how much.

That said, I had never compared my mana with anybody else's, so I didn't really have a clear reference point, either. While I thought about how to respond, Justus crossed his arms and looked at Eckhart.

"Eckhart, out of everyone here, Lord Ferdinand knows better than anyone how strong that feybeast is now that it's consumed Lady Rozemyne's mana. And we all just heard him say that only she's capable of dealing with it, yeah? What you need to do here is follow Lord Ferdinand's orders and help Lady Rozemyne get that goitz in a Wind cage."

Eckhart shot me a worried look, but quickly shook it off and gave a nod. "You're right. I'll do everything I can to help. Rozemyne, put away your feybeast to save your mana for the Wind shield. Ride with Brigitte. Everyone else, we'll follow on our highbeasts and fight off any of the smaller feybeasts that try to attack her. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

I turned Lessy back into a feystone and got onto Brigitte's highbeast, before returning to the forest where the goitz was continuing its rampage. It was moving faster than before, likely because it was getting more used to the surplus of mana or how large it was.

As soon as we got close, its head snapped in our direction. Two vertically elongated pupils locked onto me, before opening wider in a clear show that the goitz had identified me as prey. The carnivorous look in its eyes sent a shudder down my spine.

As it rushed forward, having identified me as a clump of mana, Eckhart knocked it back with a slash and yelled. "Rozemyne, pray to the gods!"

"O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, protector of all. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side..." I prayed, pouring mana into my ring as I always did.

For a split second, it felt as though the goddess herself was right next to me. I reflexively looked up at the purple moon, goosebumps raising on my arms. I couldn't tell whether it was due to the moon or if something really was nearby, but the flow of mana felt a little different somehow.

"...Please hear my prayer and lend me your divine strength. Grant me your shield of Wind, so that I might blow away those who mean ill will," I continued, picturing a flipped umbrella as I made the Wind shield to contain the goitz. And, just as I had envisioned, a translucent amber shield appeared in the air. It even had the same

design on the inside.

Now contained within a giant dome, the goltze charged at the shield, only to be knocked back. Everyone let out a sigh of relief, but I clasped my chest; I had felt a chunk of my mana get sucked out upon the impact. For a second, I thought it was just me imagining things, but no—my mana was being drained each time the goltze rampaged around and hit the shield of Wind.

“Rozemyne, you don’t look so good. Is your mana holding up okay?”

“...I’m still fine. It’s just... this is a lot different from what I’m used to. I’ve made a few Wind shields before, but my mana’s never been sucked out each time it was attacked.”

“That’s because the goltze is attacking with mana that your shield cancels out. I would guess that everyone you’ve faced before now simply didn’t have that much mana,” Eckhart replied.

I nodded. He was right. The first time I had used it was during Spring Prayer when I was fighting farmers, and when I used it to protect everyone at the temple, I hadn’t been hit with Ferdinand’s mana head-on; my shield simply blocked the stray sparks of mana directed at the toad count.

Never had I thought that it would require so much mana to maintain a shield of Wind against a strong foe. I gritted my teeth and glared at the goltze as it repeatedly slammed into the shield, trying to break through. If it continued draining my mana at this rate, I had no idea whether I could maintain the shield long enough for Ferdinand to get here.

...Come as soon as you can, Ferdinand.

“Rozemyne, you look sick. Are you not out of mana yet?” Eckhart asked.

“I still have mana,” I replied.

It definitely took a lot to maintain the shield amid all the attacks, but the bigger problem for me right now was my concentration. In the past, all I needed to do was make the shield and that was that, but now I had to stay focused and keep my mana flowing to stop the shield from breaking apart.

“...But I am fighting an even greater foe than the goltze right now.”

“An even greater foe?! What could that be?!” Eckhart exclaimed.

“Sleep itself.”

Exhaustion and the passage of time had coalesced into one of humanity’s greatest foes: sleepiness. Although I had napped earlier that evening, we hadn’t left the city until long after seventh bell. It was already late in the night when the ruelles had started to grow and I could harvest one, and there had been non-stop conflict ever since.

My young body was reaching its limit.

On top of that, I was riding with Brigitte. She had one arm wrapped around me, and thanks to her softening her breastplate to avoid hurting my head, I had the most incredible boob pillow enticing me to drift away to sleep.

...Nnngh. I just wanna sleep!

“Get a grip, Rozemyne! Nobody else here is capable of making and maintaining such a large shield!”

“I know that! Which is why I’m offering a deal. Someone, anyone—tell me some hilarious, fascinating stories to drive away all of my sleepiness!” I wrenched my drooping eyelids open to keep glaring at the govtze, asking for the knights to not just knock down the smaller feybeasts that occasionally leapt toward us, but to keep me awake as well.

“That’s a tall order. Justus is probably the man for that job, what with all the information he has. Take it away, friend.”

“Hold it. I’m good at gathering info, not retelling it. Not to mention, I don’t know Lady Rozemyne well enough to pick a good story for her. Damuel’s served her for a long time, so surely he’s the man for this job.”

The two archnobles looked toward Damuel, who paled and shook his head hard. “Lady Rozemyne is interested in books and libraries. I don’t know any stories that could satisfy her!” he cried.

Justus immediately raised an eyebrow. “Libraries? Then shall I regale you with tales of the Royal Academy’s library?”

“Yes! Please do! Tell me how many books it has, what those books are about... Anything!”

My sleepiness was blown away in an instant. The Royal Academy was a school for noble children that I would be attending when I turned ten, and it had a full-on school library. I wanted to use this opportunity to learn as much as I could about it.



Justus laughed. “I never thought that I would meet someone so interested in this trivia.”

From there, Justus began telling me all about the Royal Academy’s library. It might have been meaningless trivia to most people, but to me, it was valuable, fascinating information. The year it was built, the number of books it housed, what those books were about, who had donated the most to it, the names and ages of the librarians working within, and finally, the forbidden bookcase—every single detail sent my heart dancing.

“Apologies for the wait!”

Just as my desire to head to the Royal Academy was bursting at the seams, Ferdinand arrived. His white lion soared over to where we were, before flapping its wings to stop in place.

“...So that’s the goltze, then. You have done well to keep it trapped there, Rozemyne. It must have taken much concentration and mana. Very well done,” Ferdinand said, praising me as he looked at my shield and the goltze rampaging within it.

“I was able to focus thanks to Justus telling me so many fascinating things.”

“I see. Judging by the looks on everyone else’s faces, I will refrain from asking for details. Eckhart, let us destroy the goltze at once.”

“Yes, sir!”

Ferdinand promptly looked from me to Eckhart, then whipped his shtappe out and turned it into a claymore as well. He then flew up into the air, pouring more mana than I had ever seen before into his blade. Eckhart shot Ferdinand a tense look, then stood protectively in front of us and slowly raised his own claymore, similarly pouring mana into it.

Once Ferdinand was above the goltze’s head, his claymore began to shine with a rainbow of colors. “We are going all out!” he roared. “Ready your blade!”

At that, he lifted his sword above his head and plummeted toward the creature as if planning to crash into it. During his descent, it seemed as though the shining rainbow engulfing his sword was getting steadily brighter.

“Rozemyne, remove the shield!”

I hurriedly got rid of my shield, and in an instant, both Ferdinand and Eckhart swung their swords. An immense slash of light descended upon the goltze’s head, quickly followed by an ear-splitting explosion, and a shockwave so powerful that it made me reel. Trees were ripped from the ground and collapsed as dirt and rocks flew through the air.

“HYAAAH!” I crossed my arms in front of my face just as Brigitte swept her cape around us for protection. I heard the sounds of debris

hitting the cape, but it seemed that Eckhart's slash had protected the area behind him from most of the carnage.

Ferdinand's singular swing had eradicated the goltze, causing it to melt into complete nothingness. All that remained was a large feystone, which he picked up and looked over before shaking his head. "As expected. It's unusable."

The feystone that we had earned by killing the goltze was, of course, a goltze feystone, not a ruelle. The stone contained the mana of a bunch of feybeasts on top of my own, meaning it would be unusable for the potion.

"Eckhart, share this among yourselves later," Ferdinand said as he tossed the feystone toward him. Eckhart caught it, then carefully placed it inside one of his leather pouches.

As I looked over the fallen trees, I saw that the ruelle tree from before was still standing. There wasn't a single ruelle left, however—they had all either been gathered by Justus or eaten by the feybeasts.

"...I failed," I murmured.

Despite having come this far with everyone and managing to fill a ruelle with mana, a zantze had taken it from us. We had been forced to summon Ferdinand over when it subsequently turned into a goltze, leaving him to clean up the mess, and what did we have to show for it? Nothing at all.

I felt a large hand rest upon my head. "You are not to blame here; we simply lacked enough information about the Night of Schutzaria. Next year, we will be fully prepared for this situation. So... do not cry," Ferdinand said.

"I-I'm not crying. I was just yawning because I'm so tired," I said, hurriedly rubbing my eyes and looking up at Ferdinand, who let out a short, haughty laugh.

My Winter Preparations

The ruelle gathering had been a failure and I ended up bedridden, having to drink some potions to recover. But the Harvest Festival itself ended without issue.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne,” Gil said upon my return to the temple.

I sighed. “And so I have returned. Did anything happen while I was gone?”

“There is much we need to discuss,” he began, prompting Fran to step forward.

“And to that end, Gil, please guide Lady Rozemyne to her orphanage director’s chambers to talk there. It will be more peaceful there since she has just returned from the Harvest Festival and her things are currently being returned to the High Bishop’s chambers,” he suggested, indirectly saying that I would get in the way of the movers.

I heard him loud and clear, and so we headed to the orphanage director’s chambers with Gil and my guard knights.

“Here you are, Lady Rozemyne.”

Gil served me tea once we were inside, which I sipped as he caught me up on everything that had happened while I was gone. He was making clear strides in his tea-making skills, and while he still wasn’t as good as Fran, he was a lot better than before. He told me about how much paper and how many picture books they had made, how much ink they needed, and so on, before moving on to talking about a trombe.

“A stretchy tree appeared in the forest while we were making paper there, and we all cut it down together. It was large enough that the soldiers had to help,” he explained. “They said we had done very well and that, since they didn’t need the young, thin branches, we were allowed to take those with us. We’ve already peeled away the black bark.”

Lutz had apparently negotiated with the soldiers to let us take all the young trombe wood with us.

“As long as nobody was hurt, I’m glad to hear that.”

“Afterward, Ingo came to the workshop to discuss improving the printing press with Lutz and the gray priests. I believe Lutz will have a more detailed report on that for you.”

“I am looking forward to that.” Just thinking about improving the

printing press made me excited. What sort of changes did they have in mind already? “What about the kids from Hasse? Are they fitting in well? Would it be okay for me to go and check up on them?”

“...We can go to the orphanage, if you would like.”

“Oh yes, I would. There is something I need to ask Wilma, after all.”

And so, I headed to the orphanage with my guards. Wilma was surprised by my sudden arrival, but when I explained that everyone else was busy moving things back to my room, she giggled.

“You have so few attendants, Lady Rozemyne, that these matters often prove to be a handful.”

“...Do I really have that few attendants? I’ve heard that most blue priests maintain about five, which is as many as I have.” I also knew that the former High Bishop had about six attendants. I say “about” since I wasn’t sure whether Delia counted, but still—we weren’t too far off from each other.

“That is enough for most blue priests, but you are the High Bishop, the orphanage director, *and* a forewoman, all at once. I believe you would want at least three attendants for each position,” Wilma replied.

As it stood, she was handling the orphanage, Gil was managing the workshop, and Fran, Monika, and Nicola were taking care of the High Bishop side of my work. Considering that Nicola also usually went to the kitchen to help out, I basically had one attendant for each job, which did indeed seem like a lot of strain on them.

“I will discuss this with Fran and Ferdinand, and increase their numbers if necessary. In any case, how were things here during the Harvest Festival? Did you have enough food?”

“Yes. We finished it without issue thanks to your preparations, Lady Rozemyne.”

Even though many of the blue priests had left with their personal chefs, the orphanage had many gray shrine maidens who knew how to cook now. They had managed to survive the Harvest Festival without starving thanks to us preparing food ahead of time.

“How are the children from Hasse holding up? Are they fitting in now?”

“At first, there were some problems with their attitudes being so different, and I sometimes saw them at a loss for what to do. But the priests and shrine maidens who had lived with them in Hasse provided some assistance, and over time, everyone came to understand these differences,” Wilma explained.

The kids in the temple had been raised here without ever going outside, so they weren’t too familiar with the concept of people thinking differently from them. But they had recently seen Lutz and

Leon working in the workshop, as well as Johann and Zack visiting as craftsmen, among other guests, which had made it easier for them to accept.

“How are winter preparations for the orphanage going?”

“We have already started boiling jam, drying mushrooms, and doing everything else we can. More firewood was gathered in the forest this year than last, and what we’ve bought through the Gilberta Company has already been delivered,” she said.

Pig Day was still a ways off, but this year, we would be doing it together with the Gilberta Company. And with their experience from last year under their belts, they wouldn’t have any problems.

“Excuse me, Lady Rozemyne. Nora and Marthe were asking whether the orphanage spun thread or weaved fabric for its winter handiwork. As we had never heard of these things, I wanted to ask you about them. Should we acquire what would be needed to do them this year...?” Wilma asked hesitantly.

Weaving and spinning were the most important kinds of winter handiwork that a female commoner could do. They were necessary to make clothes for your family, and sewing skills were an important factor in becoming a beautiful woman who men wanted to marry. However, gray priests and shrine maidens were given clothes from the temple. At the moment, we had just been buying cheap used clothes from poor lower city stores for the dirtier work in the forest or printing in the workshop.

Honestly, it would end up a lot more expensive for us to buy thread. Even those who were bought by nobles were given clothes and hand-me-downs in the noble estates, and since basically no priests or shrine maidens ever got married, sewing and weaving skills didn’t really matter that much.

“As the temple provides clothes, there is no need to make them. I am not currently considering weaving to be important. However, it might be wise to prepare wool and knit clothes in general, so as to have warmer attire for the winter.”

Last year we had bought old sweaters for warmth, but the more warm clothes one had during the winter, the better. For this reason, I decided to order wool and knitting needles from the Gilberta Company so that the orphanage could work on knitting this winter.

“Having warm clothes will be much appreciated. Nora and Marthe seem to know how to knit, and it might be wise to ask Tuuli if she has the time to help as well,” Wilma replied, seeming quite enthusiastic. It would probably be a good way to kill time over the winter, too.

After telling her about the tithes that were being prepared in the castle to be sent to the temple later, I stood up from my chair.

“Before you go, Lady Rozemyne, there is one more thing I would

like to ask. I drew a few more illustrations of the High Priest using the art utensils provided by Lady Elvira, but I am unsure of where to take them.”

“Please show them to me at once,” I requested, and soon I was face to face with an illustration of Ferdinand drawn using soft colors. It had Wilma’s filter over it, of course, so Ferdinand was basically radiating a heavenly aura.

This really makes Ferdinand look like a saint, but that’s just not right. He definitely doesn’t give gentle smiles like this! They’re dark! And full of evil!

I was screaming on the inside, but as far as I could tell, Elvira really did see Ferdinand like this. She would probably cry tears of joy upon seeing it.

“Please wrap it up in cloth, place it in a chest, and bring it to my orphanage director’s chambers,” I instructed. There was a chance that Ferdinand would find it if it were brought to my High Bishop’s chambers, so I decided it would be best to leave it in my orphanage director’s chambers instead.

“As you wish.”

Having finished talking with Wilma, I returned to my chambers with Gil and my guard knights. The unpacking had already been completed.

“Lady Rozemyne, please spend the remainder of today resting. You will be quite busy starting tomorrow,” Fran said.

Over half of the blue priests had already returned from the Harvest Festival, and as the High Bishop, I would need to listen to their reports with Ferdinand tomorrow. I would then have to retrieve the small chalices from the blue priests who had visited provinces ruled by other nobles, and after confirming that all the golden chalices were accounted for, I would line them up on a shelf and lock them away. Managing the chalices was part of the High Bishop’s duties, and we would be refilling them with mana over the winter’s Dedication Ritual.

“Furthermore, you will need to decide on both the ritual and home visitation schedules,” Fran continued.

The tithes that the blue priests had acquired during the Harvest Festival would later be brought from the castle to their homes, and so they would thus be visiting their homes to accept the delivery. But since there was so much to move around, the process would turn into a huge mess unless we created a schedule and had them leave gradually over time.

“These are the temple’s—or rather, the blue priests’—winter preparations. You will need to visit the castle to retrieve your own tithes, Lady Rozemyne, but that can be done when you give your

report to the archduke.”

It seemed that I would need to go to the castle and give a report to Sylvester once all the blue priests had returned and I had all the chalices. That, too, was the duty of the High Bishop.

“The plan is for the castle to prepare my tithe and send it over via wagon,” I said.

“That would be a great help. But your winter clothing is going to be prepared in the castle as well, correct? We will need to bring that here as well, and you will surely have many meetings over your winter debut,” Fran said, listing out all of the reasons why I would continue to be busy even now that the Harvest Festival was over. I had assumed everything would be the same as last year and that I would only need to prepare my chambers and the orphanage for winter, but all of my new responsibilities meant that things weren’t quite so simple.

And so began a series of meetings with blue priests that continued day after day. Their main job had been to retrieve the chalices, but they also told us about the tithes, tax officers, and atmosphere of each farming town. Some blue priests went into surprisingly thorough detail, while others simply noted that not much had changed from the previous year.

“...Ferdinand, might I suggest delegating some administrative work to Kampfer and Frietack? Neither are from wealthy families, and it seems they will take their work seriously if paid a proper amount.”

“I do not have the time to teach them from the ground up without knowing how motivated they will prove to be,” Ferdinand said curtly. As it turned out, he had actually delegated work before, but the blue priests were so incompetent and the former High Bishop so intrusive that he had ultimately decided to just do everything himself.

“I know that you get work done faster and more reliably than everyone else, but you’re so busy right now because you always use that as an excuse to take on more work. You should learn to delegate, even if things end up taking longer as a result. After all, Bezewanst isn’t here to get in your way anymore,” I said.

Now that Bezewanst was gone, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that Ferdinand wielded absolute power within the temple. There were some blue priests who had been minimizing contact with Ferdinand to protect themselves from the High Bishop, and now Ferdinand could use this opportunity to train them.

“How many blue priests would normally be doing the work that you’ve taken it upon yourself to manage? Just so you know, Sylvester was giving you more because he assumed you were bored and had an abundance of spare time here. Have you not been telling him how much work you really have?”

“Work given by the archduke must be done swiftly and properly. What point would there be in reporting the amount? All he needs to know are the results,” Ferdinand said.

I couldn’t help but sigh about how strict his attitude toward work was. Who had raised him to be like this? I had read in a book once that keeping your superiors updated was one of the fundamentals of a smooth workflow, and while the people here didn’t seem to respect that, it was surely important.

“One key aspect of a smooth workflow is keeping everyone up to date on what’s going on. For example, Sylvester relaxed the printing schedule a little after I told him how I felt. He said that I could continue at my own pace.”

“You... You told him you could not finish the work you were given?” Ferdinand asked, his eyes wide with disbelief.

I pursed my lips in a pout. “I didn’t say that I couldn’t do it. I just told him the truth—that he was being so unreasonable about it that I didn’t have any spare time at all. He assumed that you would be doing it all for me, Ferdinand, and was very surprised when I told him that I was taking the lead myself.”

“And that was enough for Sylvester, of all people, to agree to slow down? I see he is very soft on you,” Ferdinand said, crossing his arms with a frown. But really, he was the weird one for piling so much work on me when I was so sickly and—at least in appearance—a child. He would probably just say that it only made sense to give work to those who were capable of completing it, but I didn’t want to do more than I had to.

I just want to read. Give. Me. Reading time!

“In any case, the one thing I can say for sure is that you should not expect me to do as much work as you, Ferdinand. I simply lack the stamina for it,” I said. My hands were already going to be full with the Dedication Ritual and dealing with noble society over winter; my body couldn’t handle much more.

“You have a fair point, but I have prepared more than enough potions for the both of us.”

“Well, I don’t think a lifestyle dependent on potion abuse is very healthy! Actually, Ferdinand, I really think you need to learn to live without relying on them. If you don’t reduce your workload to a point you can handle on your own, you’re going to collapse one day. Don’t make me tell Rihyarda about this.”

At that, Ferdinand gave an extremely displeased scowl. He could no doubt imagine what Rihyarda would say to him—or yell at him, rather.

“Reducing one’s workload is no simple matter. What would you have me do?”

“First, you can go to the castle less frequently. I know it’s a key part of gathering information, but since they give you work every time you go there, I think staying at the temple and having Justus gather information in your place would be better,” I suggested.

Ferdinand tightly knitted his brow in a deep frown. “But if I do not go, then work will continue to pile up on Sylvester’s desk.”

“That’s Sylvester’s work. You can let him handle it. How will Ehrenfest survive when its ruler cannot even handle personal responsibility? Despite everything you say, you are actually spoiling Sylvester quite a bit. You should be as strict with him as you are with Wilfried.”

It didn’t take long to realize that the only ones Ferdinand considered family were his half-brother Sylvester and Karstedt, his older cousin. But when I told him not to spoil the archduke, he looked shocked.

“Me, spoiling Sylvester? Nobody has ever accused me of that before.”

“Think about it. You tell me to clean up my own messes, don’t you? And while you help with the work that I can’t do, you never help me with the stuff that I can handle myself. Is the work on Sylvester’s desk work that he literally cannot do? If we have an archduke who can’t handle his own work, that’s a pretty big problem.”

Ferdinand closed his eyes and shook his head, stroking his chin. “He attempts to push the work onto others, but he is not incapable of doing it himself.”

“Sylvester should work at least as hard as Wilfried is now. Please prioritize your work in the temple over helping with Sylvester’s. And finally, delegate some of your own work to other blue priests to give yourself some spare time,” I said with a clenched fist.

Ferdinand looked down at me, his interest caught. “Spare time, hm? And what purpose would that serve?”

“...It’s for your health. It has absolutely nothing to do with me securing more reading time.”

“At last, you reveal your true intentions. But, well... I suppose your points are valid nonetheless. In that case, when Sylvester makes unreasonable demands of the temple, I expect you to be there as the High Bishop to stop him,” Ferdinand said with a grin, unloading one of his more annoying duties onto me.

...Strange. I wanted to reduce my workload, but now I have even more work. Why?

Once I had received all the chalices from the blue priests, I arranged a meeting with Sylvester and headed to the castle with Ferdinand. As soon as we arrived, I started driving to his office in my

one-person Pandabus, simultaneously asking Rihyarda to make the necessary arrangements so that I could take home the prepared parts of my tithe on my way back. I also asked how Wilfried's studies were going.

"Wilfried is making steady progress on his task list. I've since replaced half of his attendants, and he's now studying harder than ever before. He throws himself at the karuta each and every day, saying that he'll beat you next time for sure, milady. He can now read most letters and all numbers, though he needs to practice his writing a little more," Rihyarda explained with a lively expression on her face. She really did love raising kids.

Since I was already there, I decided to teach her a card game that involved addition as a key component. Wilfried would probably learn a little bit of math by playing it on top of everything else.

"His harspiel practice is going well, too, and he should be capable of playing a song by winter. He always ends up throwing a tantrum since he's learning through repetition, but after crying and stomping his feet for a bit, he gives up and practices all sullen-like," Rihyarda added. "Lord Sylvester and Lady Florencia were both shocked to see how quickly he's progressing, and I can hardly express how happy they are. They're beyond thankful, milady."

Any parent would be happy to see their kid escaping disinheritance. And since Wilfried knew how pleased they were, I was sure that he would keep working hard.

As we arrived at the archduke's office, I put away Lessy and entered the room with Ferdinand. There was a large stack of paperwork on the desk, just as he had said there would be, and upon seeing Ferdinand walk in, even the scholars nearby looked as though they had been saved.

Ferdinand ignored them all, told Sylvester that I had brought all the chalices back, then gave a report on the Harvest Festival.

"So the Harvest Festival went off without a hitch, huh?" Sylvester remarked. "Good going, Rozemyne. And I hate to ask, but I'm gonna need you to fill up ten extra chalices, just like you did last year."

"No."

My reply was instant.

Sylvester blinked in surprise, then cocked his head. It was clear from the look on his face that he either couldn't understand what I had just said, or simply didn't want to understand, so I explained my reasoning for turning him down.

"We can't do the same thing we did last year. I need to enter noble society this year, and the temple has fewer people due to the incident in spring."

Bezewanst had been a flawed man, but as one would expect given

his family's status, he had noticeably more mana than the other blue priests. Last year had been hard enough, and no way would we be able to manage it again with less people.

"...I've already accepted the request. Can't you do anything about this?" Sylvester asked.

But no matter what he said, I needed to rest, and I needed to participate in noble gatherings. I already had to be there with Wilfried to ensure he didn't embarrass himself during his winter debut; I didn't have the time, stamina, or mana to spend on filling chalices from other duchies.

"Please do not underestimate our shortage of mana and blue priests, or forget my lack of stamina. If you absolutely must give them the mana, then you may come to the temple and donate it yourself."

"Wait, *me*?!"

"Is it not expected for nobles to take responsibility for their actions and solve problems they introduced themselves? You are the one who accepted this request without asking me what I thought, so it is therefore up to you to get yourself out of this mess. No matter how hard we try, the temple simply cannot manage more than half of those chalices."

Ehrenfest has just as serious of a mana shortage as anywhere else. I don't know what political deals have led to Sylvester taking on these chalices, but we don't have the resources to take care of other duchies on top of ourselves. And should they absolutely need to be filled, Sylvester can surely use his own mana, or send more blue priests our way. There has to be something he could do.

Sylvester quickly gave up on convincing me, turning to look at Ferdinand instead. "Ferdinand, can y—"

"My sincere apologies, but this is the decision of the High Bishop you appointed. I am but the mere High Priest serving beneath her. Furthermore, do you recall what I told you last year? 'Just this once,' I believe it was. Rozemyne is correct—you are the aub, so solve your own problems," Ferdinand said with his lips curved into a grin, rejecting Sylvester in a tone that lacked even a trace of remorse.

Sylvester opened his eyes wide and cradled his head. Judging by that reaction, I could tell that Ferdinand had only accepted the request last year after much grumbling and complaining.

"I'm afraid the temple simply has no leeway whatsoever. Please do your own work without relying on Ferdinand, Sylvester. Do you not need to serve as an example to Wilfried, as both his father and the aub?" I asked, giving Sylvester and the scholars who had looked so desperately at Ferdinand a dignified smile.

At that, I tugged on Ferdinand's sleeve and we sped out of the office.

“Ferdinand, shall we return to the temple?”

“Why so soon? I believe we should wait until the dust has settled.”

“Because you are incapable of relaxing for even a moment, Sylvester’s scholars will ask for your help if we stay in the castle, and you will ultimately agree to do his work for him again,” I observed.

Ferdinand drew his brows together. Despite his frown, his lack of protesting meant that I had been right on the money. I could still remember Fran mentioning that, even when Ferdinand brought his attendants to the Noble’s Quarter during the Starbind Ceremony and ordered them to rest, they all ultimately gathered to discuss work anyway.

...Ah, geez! He and Fran are way too alike!

“If you wish to work that much, do your work in the temple. And while you’re at it, train your successor. In the event that you decide all the blue priests are beyond saving, you may train a gray priest instead.”

Once Ferdinand freed up his schedule and started using his spare time to seriously train a successor, he would spend less time piling things onto me, which would decrease my workload. A voice in my head was saying that he would never let me get off so easily, but I decided to ignore it.

“Now there is an idea. Training my successor, hm...?” Ferdinand mused, glancing my way before crossing his arms and falling into thought.

...Why are you looking at me? I don’t like this. This can’t mean anything good. Ferdinand, stop looking at me. Please.

Epilogue

“Welcome home, Lady Brigitte.”

“And so I have returned, Nadine.”

With the Harvest Festival over, Brigitte returned from the temple to her room in the knight dorms. Here, she was welcomed with a smile by Nadine—an apprentice attendant who had left her home in Illgner to accompany Brigitte and manage her dorm chambers. Her family was among the few goodhearted ones who had stayed in the province after Brigitte’s engagement was canceled.

Nadine had been asked to take on the role by Brigitte’s older brother, Giebe Illgner, and then subsequently ordered to by her own parents, but Brigitte was still thankful for her continued service even after she moved to the temple.

“Lady Brigitte, the warm water is ready and waiting for you.”

Brigitte removed her light armor, took a bath to refresh herself, and then sat down to enjoy the tea that Nadine had prepared for her. It was her favorite kind, and as she savored the taste, she could feel the tension melting away. Guarding subjects for extensive periods of time always left her feeling uneasy and exhausted.

“There’s nothing more calming than relaxing in my own room after a day of work,” Brigitte mused. She had informed Nadine of her return in advance so that everything would be ready when she returned, and her trusted servant knew what she liked down to the letter.

Brigitte also had a room at the temple to sleep in, where Nicola and Monika would help tend to her when necessary, but the lack of magic tools and her own attendant always made it feel somewhat inconvenient.

“Lady Brigitte, please do not compare your dorm room to the temple,” Nadine said with a thoroughly dissatisfied look. She was a noble herself, and so didn’t want her work compared to that of temple gray shrine maidens.

Brigitte could understand that, since she herself hadn’t considered the temple somewhere suited for nobles before being assigned to work there. And in reality, the work of commoner attendants just couldn’t be compared to what noble attendants like Nadine could do.

“As I have said before, Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand carefully prepared my room to suit my every need, so the temple is

nowhere near as inconvenient as I had heard,” Brigitte replied, continuing to sip her tea.

Nadine wasn’t about to change her mind on the topic, but she at least seemed less prickly about it than she had been when they initially arrived. When Brigitte had spent her first night in the temple, Nadine’s eyes were full of despair, and she had muttered something about needing to inform Giebe Illgner of the travesty that was taking place.

Brigitte knew that he wouldn’t be too surprised, though. After all, her brother had allowed her to serve the archduke’s adopted daughter for Illgner’s sake.

...He wouldn’t be surprised, but I know for certain that he would curse himself for his failings as a giebe.

“Even the supposed filth of the temple is nowhere to be seen, at least not where Lady Rozemyne goes,” Brigitte said. “She is being treated very well as a member of the commander’s family.”

Rozemyne had an absurd amount of mana, and while it was only right that she be adopted by the archduke, it must have been difficult for Karstedt to give up his beloved daughter. He and his family were very worried about Rozemyne now that she was the aub’s adopted daughter.

“I am aware. The commander summons you each time you go to train, Cornelius interrogates you about life in the temple when you cross paths, and Lady Elvira invites you to exclusive tea parties. Everyone knows that,” Nadine said.

And she was right. What’s more, everything she had described was usually done in front of other nobles, which made it common knowledge that Brigitte was being favored by the commander of the Knight’s Order and his family. This had in turn changed how others looked at her; there were fewer insulting whispers now, and friends who had previously been avoiding her were now speaking to her again.

“I know that it was right for you to become Lady Rozemyne’s guard knight, and that this is all in Illgner’s best interests. The fact that the commander’s family trusts you so much after just one season is proof of your hard work. But still. I’m frustrated by your poor reputation in noble society,” Nadine said, her eyes lowered in sorrow.

Brigitte knew that people believed she had fallen into despair at her engagement being canceled and agreed to enter the temple out of self-destructive desperation. They were only half right, though; she wasn’t self-destructive in the least, and if not for her situation, there was no doubt that she wouldn’t have considered serving Rozemyne or agreed to work in the temple.

“Illgner’s future matters more than my reputation, does it not? But

in any case, I will be attending one of Lady Elvira's tea parties tomorrow afternoon. Is everything ready?"

"Of course. I have finished preparations for us both," Nadine said with a happy smile, her chest proudly puffed out. She very much looked forward to attending Elvira's tea parties with Brigitte, since they always served unique and tasty sweets.

...I really must thank Lady Elvira for her consideration.

Just as Brigitte had suffered from ill-meaning gossip, Nadine had been forced to endure as others cruelly remarked how hard it must be to serve someone visiting the temple, asking whether she had given up on marriage as well. Eventually, the situation became so bad that Nadine stopped smiling entirely. It was only when Karstedt's family started offering them their support that the light returned to her eyes.

"If you've finished preparing for the tea party, Nadine, I'll be spending the morning training with the Knight's Order."

"Wait, on your day off? You intend to train on the day of the tea party?" Nadine asked with a surprised look.

Brigitte nodded, her lips curling into a wry smile. Considering what had happened on the Night of Schutzaria, she knew that she needed to train as much as possible. She might not have known the details, but considering the material they had been after and Rozemyne's poor health, it was all too obvious that they were gathering the ingredients for a jureve. And if they needed a ruelle harvested on that particular night, then Brigitte could guess they would be heading back to that same forest next year. That was why she needed to be capable of taking on large hordes of feybeasts for extended periods of time.

"Guard work in the temple is lengthy and tense, but affords me no time to hone my skills. I need to get training in wherever I can," Brigitte explained.

"I see. Though as your apprentice attendant, I would rather you not do any training that might leave scrapes and bruises before the tea party," Nadine said, looking somewhat worried.

Brigitte thanked her for her concern, then got into bed.

When Brigitte headed to the knights' training grounds the next day, just as she had told Nadine she would, she found that Eckhart was there already. He had accompanied Rozemyne during the Harvest Festival and fought alongside Brigitte on the Night of Schutzaria, and judging by how he was swinging his spear against multiple targets at once, it was obvious that he was training for next year's gathering as well.

Brigitte readied a similar spear and also began to practice on the targets. It wouldn't be hard to knock them all out with a low sweep;

the tricky part was finding a way to kill them all at once so that they wouldn't be able to eat each other and get stronger.

"Brigitte, the commander's asking for you," one knight called out just as she had stopped to take a break.

After giving her thanks, she headed to the commander's office. Inside was not only Karstedt, but Eckhart as well.

Karstedt stroked his mustache once before addressing them. "Brigitte, Eckhart—welcome back from your lengthy Harvest Festival assignment. I've heard from Lord Ferdinand that the ruelle harvesting ended in failure. He's asked me to get the details from the both of you, given that it was mostly over by the time he arrived. Who wants to begin?"

As Karstedt looked between them both, Eckhart began to report on the events of the gathering and what everyone had been doing at the time.

"Brigitte, is there anything you'd like to add to or contest about Eckhart's report?"

"Lady Rozemyne was not responsible for the outcome. She was successfully able to harvest a ruelle from the tree, but a zantze managed to steal the fruit from her. The gathering only ended in failure because of our ineptitude as her guards."

That they had allowed a feybeast to even get close to Rozemyne was incompetent, to say the least. And this was only made worse by the fact that, when it consumed the mana-filled ruelle and evolved into a goltze, Rozemyne had ended up needing to protect her own guards by containing it in a Wind shield.

"There were no other means by which to contain a goltze that strong and with that much mana, but as her guard knights, I feel that our failure is inexcusable," Brigitte said.

Eckhart nodded in agreement. "We failed because we lacked information on what special properties the ruelles are imbued with on the Night of Schutzaria. We also didn't bring enough guard knights, and those of us who were there lacked the skill to protect her. As a result, we were forced to summon Lord Ferdinand."

They had managed to keep collateral damage to a minimum by following Ferdinand's orders, but one wrong move and the Knight's Order itself would have needed to be summoned.

"I see. With that many feybeasts swarming the tree, it seems we will need more firepower next year," Karstedt noted.

"In that case, I would suggest removing Damuel the layknight and instead bringing along more archknights and medknights," Brigitte said, remembering his inability to deal with the huge swarm of feybeasts. It was hardly his fault, given that he was a layknight without much mana, but she believed it would be best to leave him

behind next year. After all, this was on a completely different level from guarding Rozemyne in the temple, where most people considerably lacked mana.

Karstedt stroked his chin as he considered Brigitte's suggestion. "I understand your point, but we want knowledge of this gathering kept to a minimum, with as few people involved as possible. And seeing as this is personal business, I wouldn't be able to command the Knight's Order to accompany us anyway. In this case, even a laynoble would be better than nothing at all."

"True enough," Brigitte replied. If only those familiar with Rozemyne's private life could be involved, it was probably best to bring Damuel.

"Lord Ferdinand and I will accompany you all on the Night of Schutzaria next year. Until then, focus your training around wide-range attacks."

"Yes, sir!" Brigitte said with a salute. While she thought the aub having his very own guard knight accompany his daughter's material gathering was beyond overprotective, she wasn't against it; the love that the Karstedt family had for one another warmed her heart, and it was thanks to this affection that Brigitte's efforts to help her brother were being rewarded.

"...Incidentally, how is Rozemyne holding up as the High Bishop? And are you having any problems in the temple, Brigitte?" Karstedt asked, changing the subject and giving his usual questions once they had finished going over the Night of Schutzaria.

Brigitte told him about Rozemyne's time in the temple and what she had heard from other knights. "Three female knights asked to serve Lady Rozemyne the other day, but Lord Cornelius refused them without ever bringing the matter to you. He believes they saw that Angelica guards her only in the castle, and assumed that they could do the same without ever going to the temple."

The truth was, however, that Angelica simply wasn't allowed to leave the Noble's Quarter because she wasn't yet of age. As soon as she was, she too would join Rozemyne in the temple and lower city. The girls had asked to serve Rozemyne not knowing that, and Cornelius turned them down without explaining why.

"He warned me that Angelica is likely to become the subject of jealousy, since she gets to serve Lady Rozemyne as an apprentice guard knight without needing to visit the temple," Brigitte continued.

Cornelius had warned Brigitte over and over again that Rozemyne could drop dead in an instant if they weren't careful, which was why he was being exceptionally cautious about the people who got close to her. Again, such overprotectiveness was heartwarming, but it robbed him of a level head at times. This was in part due to the fact that

Cornelius was still a child, but this wasn't really a matter that Brigitte could state her honest opinion on since he was an archnoble and she a mednoble.

"...I see. I haven't informed many others that Angelica will be accompanying her to the temple as well, since that allows us to better judge the intentions of those asking to serve Rozemyne. But that jealousy might prove problematic. I will tell Cornelius to explain why he is refusing them next time."

"Understood. Furthermore... I have heard that some intend to serve Lady Rozemyne only until they come of age. Once they have graduated from the Royal Academy, they plan to return home and begin preparing for marriage. Only a very rare few such as Angelica are willing to continue visiting the temple after coming of age, so please take care."

"Understandable, considering the brief window for marriage that women have. You have my thanks for your feminine perspective, Brigitte; a man such as myself wouldn't notice details like that. But in any case, that should do for now. You have a tea party to attend this afternoon, right? Go and enjoy yourself. Elvira poured her all into the sweets that are being served today," Karstedt said warmly, his kind words bringing a smile to Brigitte's face.

That night, Brigitte sent an ordonnanz to her brother, Giebe Illgner.

"Dearest brother, I am gaining the trust of the archduke's family as one of their retainers. Lady Rozemyne expressed her interest in Illgner's varied lumber industry during the Harvest Festival. Am I proving useful to Illgner? I believe that my decision to serve Lady Rozemyne was the correct one. She is an adorable girl, though admittedly strange in more ways than one. Please look forward to her winter debut."

Wilfried's Day as the High Bishop

I hate how Rozemyne gets everything she wants. I'm her older brother and I finished my baptism back in spring, but she's the one who gets all the attention. Lamprecht says she's having it rough in her own ways, but that's gotta be him lying to protect his little sister. I mean, a bit of running was all it took for her to fall over and almost die. How could she do anything?

Rozemyne's the only one who gets to leave the castle whenever she wants, doesn't get stuck with teachers, and gets complimented by Father at dinner. I'm not even allowed to go to his office since I'll "get in the way," but he lets Rozemyne in... It's just not fair!

When I told Rozemyne how I felt, she suggested we switch places for a day. That was the best idea I'd ever heard. I'd get to leave the castle and all my annoying retainers, and go to the temple where I could do whatever I wanted just like Rozemyne did. Meanwhile, she could enjoy being surrounded by a bunch of teachers.

"Shall we go, Lord Wilfried?" Lamprecht asked, before spreading the wings of his highbeast and soaring up into the air. I was sitting in front of him, and the feeling of rising into the air and flying filled me with complete giddiness. It really wasn't fair that Rozemyne had gotten to experience this first.

"Lamprecht, when I make my highbeast, is it going to be a lion like Ferdinand's?" I asked, looking ahead at Ferdinand, who was guiding us to the temple.

Lamprecht nodded. "Yes. Children of the archduke use single-headed lions, and when you become the archduke yourself, you can make one that has three heads like the duchy's symbol."

I had never seen Father's highbeast myself, but it sounded super cool. Of course he'd have a super-cool highbeast. And it was while I was thinking about the awesome lion I was going to have that I realized—

"...Rozemyne's highbeast didn't look like a lion, though."

"It was peculiar, wasn't it? I've never seen a highbeast like that myself, either," Lamprecht replied.

It wasn't long before the temple came into view. It was located right between the pure-white Noble's Quarter and the brown, messy other side of the city. I'd heard about it being on the other side of the Noble's Quarter, but it was a lot closer than I thought.

"Lamprecht, what's that brown, dirty-looking area?"

“The lower city, where commoners live. It’s not a place you will ever have anything to do with, Lord Wilfried.”

A man wearing gray robes was there to welcome us when our highbeasts landed at the temple, and his eyes widened when he saw me. Ferdinand immediately got down from his highbeast and gave him a letter.

“Fran, read this. It’s from Rozemyne. The two of them are swapping places for the day,” Ferdinand said. “Wilfried, this is Fran. He’s Rozemyne’s head attendant in the temple. While you are here, you will do exactly as he says. Fran, I imagine that dealing with Wilfried will be quite the task. I shall join you at a later time.”

“Understood, High Priest. A pleasure to see you, Lord Wilfried. Shall we go and get you changed?”

“Very well,” I replied.

I was taken to the High Bishop’s chambers that Rozemyne lived in. Once there, Fran told Rozemyne’s other attendants that I was going to be the High Bishop for a day, at which point they put me in white robes. This was apparently what the High Bishop wore.

“What tea do you prefer?” an attendant called Nicola asked while Fran was reading Rozemyne’s letter. She then made me some delicious tea and served me sweets that I’d never eaten before. As they broke apart in my mouth, I was overwhelmed by an amazing sweetness.

“I’ve never had sweets like this before. Rozemyne gets all the luck. I wish I got to eat things like this all day,” I complained while taking another one.

Upon hearing that, Nicola beamed a smile. “Lady Rozemyne invented the recipes for these sweets, so if you would like to eat sweets you’ve never tasted before, I suggest you do the same and come up with the recipes yourself. Do you have any ideas? I love making things. I love eating them more, though!” she said with a chuckle, her eyes full of anticipation. But how could I know any recipes for sweets I hadn’t eaten before?

...Rozemyne invented these sweets? Is that even possible? How do you just think up sweets? I thought, stuffing my face with another as I struggled to work it out. By the time Lamprecht asked whether I was going to hand any down, I’d already eaten all but a few. I regretfully passed the rest to him.

While I was sipping the rest of my tea, Fran said something to the attendant called Monika that made her hurriedly leave the room. Ferdinand entered shortly after, almost like he’d deliberately timed it so that I’d just be finishing my drink. He was wearing the blue High Priest robes that I’d seen at Rozemyne’s baptism.

“According to Rozemyne’s chart, your schedule for today is to receive a report at the orphanage, then look over the workshop.

Lamprecht and Damuel will accompany you as guards, while Fran and Monika will serve as your attendants,” Ferdinand announced.

At that, Rozemyne’s female knight who had entered with Ferdinand saluted and stepped aside. I then accompanied Ferdinand out of the room, through some hallways, and over to another building.

“This is the orphanage where children without parents are gathered. Beyond these doors is the dining hall,” Fran said, before opening them to reveal a sizable room with large but crude-looking wooden tables lined up beside one another.

I looked around, curious, and that was when I noticed all the people kneeling inside. They were all wearing the same gray robes. It was probably like the uniform that scholars wore.

“High Bishop and High Priest, please take your seats,” Fran said.

I wasn’t that eager to sit on a plain wooden board, but Ferdinand sat down like it was nothing at all, so I didn’t have much choice but to do the same.

“Getting straight to the point—I have heard there is a report for the High Bishop. Would the one responsible for the report please come forward and begin?”

An orange-haired woman stepped forward, faced me, and started giving a report that I couldn’t understand at all. Ferdinand nodded at times, while Fran was writing some stuff down on a weird board he had.

“...What are you even saying?” I asked.

“I am giving this month’s financial report,” the woman replied.

“What does that have to do with me?” I asked, and in the next instant, Ferdinand struck me on the head with a smack. The shock was the worst part, and I held my head in surprise while trying to process what had just happened.

Lamprecht was just as surprised, and he looked at Ferdinand with wide-open eyes. “Lord Ferdinand?!”

“Wh-Wh... What?!”

I could barely even speak. There was a hot, stinging pain building up where he’d hit me, but the only thing I could do was shoot him a dumbfounded glare.

“You fool. Rozemyne is the High Bishop and orphanage director. You have swapped places with her, which means that this has everything to do with you. Even if you do not understand, sit still and keep your silence. Such is Rozemyne’s duty.”

Even though I was clearly annoyed, Ferdinand just glared back and scolded me. I decided to scowl at the woman giving the report, hoping that’d make her finish this boring thing as soon as possible, but she just giggled and continued, not even skipping anything on her sheet. It sucked.

...Does she seriously not realize that I'm mad? What a dense woman.

The report was so boring that, about midway through, I decided to go and wander around instead. But when I tried to jump down from my seat, Ferdinand shot his hand down and pinched my leg.

"That hurts! Ferdinand, what're you doing?!"

"Did you not hear me when I said to sit still, or was it simply beyond your comprehension? Are you stupid, or are you simply deaf? Perhaps even both," Ferdinand remarked, looking down at me with cold eyes like he wholeheartedly thought I was an idiot.

Blood rushed to my head. I'd never been so humiliated in my life. I stood up to punch Ferdinand, but I'd barely even balled my fists when he clamped a hand over my forehead and thrust me back into the chair.

"Shut up, sit down, and listen. Understand?"

"Nghh... Lamprecht!"

I called the name of my bodyguard, who was making no move to help me, but Ferdinand just squeezed my head even harder.

"How many times must I repeat myself? Shut up. Sit down. And listen."

Some of the kids started giggling as they watched Ferdinand hold me in place. I could hear them saying things like "What doesn't he understand?" and "He just needs to listen."

"I-I'll listen, okay?! Just let go!"

"You fool. Do not waste the time of others with such pointless tantrums," Ferdinand said with a derisive scoff before releasing his grip.

Pain radiated from my head as though his fingers had left permanent marks. I spent the rest of the report glaring at Ferdinand from the side, unable to stand up or do anything but stew in my anger.

Gah! Curse you, Ferdinand!

"That concludes this month's report. I have a bit more to discuss with Fran and the High Priest, so why don't you spend some time playing karuta with the children, High Bishop?" the woman suggested.

My ears perked up at the word "play." I quickly looked at Ferdinand, who glanced over the orphan children before returning a slow nod and saying "Very well."

I leapt off the bench in an instant, stretched a bit, and then followed Lamprecht and Damuel to where all the other kids were.

"So, what is karuta?" I asked.

"I'll teach you," one kid said. "We can play together."

Playing against adults was one thing, but I'd never lost to any of the kids who came to play in the castle. I needed to use this opportunity to prove to all the kids who had laughed at me how

amazing I really was.

“First, someone reads the written card. Then, everyone else tries to grab the art card that has the same first letter as that written card. Whoever gets the most wins,” the kid continued. “Since this is your first time playing, High Bishop, you can have one of your guards help out.”

I hadn’t played karuta before, so teaming up with Lamprecht was probably a good idea. Plus, this kid was the one who’d suggested it, so it wasn’t unfair at all.

I sat next to Lamprecht and started playing. I’d assumed Damuel would be the one reading the cards, but instead it was a kid about as old as me.

“You can read? That’s really impressive. Not even I can read yet,” I said, awestruck. But rather than appreciating the praise, the kids all gave me a confused look.

“...Huh? You’re the High Bishop, but you can’t read?”

“Thanks to the karuta and picture books Lady Rozemyne made, everyone in the orphanage can read.”

“Oh, but not Dirk! He’s just a baby,” one of the kids added, pointing at a baby crawling across the floor. It was apparently normal for all the kids in the orphanage to be able to read, and the only one who couldn’t was a baby smaller than my little brother Melchior.

...So I’m basically the same as that baby? I thought, completely taken aback. In the end, Lamprecht was only able to get the single card that was closest to us; the other kids took all the others.

“What a miserable defeat. This is what happens when you are challenged by children not instructed to lose by their parents,” Ferdinand said.

“Lord Ferdinand! You can’t just say that—” Lamprecht began, only to be interrupted.

“It is the truth, and one he needs to face,” Ferdinand said, giving another derisive laugh before moving on. “Follow me.”

Ngghhh...! Curse you, Ferdinand!

We next went through the boys’ building of the orphanage to reach the workshop. There were adults there and kids as young as me, all wearing cruddy-looking clothes, and whatever they were making had made their hands and faces all dirty.

“This is Lord Wilfried, who is serving as the High Bishop in Lady Rozemyne’s place for today,” Fran said to introduce me. At that, two young boys stepped forward, knelt down, and began their noble greetings.

“I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the fruitful days of Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind,” they said.

I poured mana into my ring—though I wasn't too good at doing it yet—before I replied. "May this meeting be blessed."

This time, I actually did pretty well. I nodded to myself, then looked up at Lamprecht, who gave me a smile and returned my nod in approval.

"Lutz, Gil—you may stand. You called Rozemyne over today, I believe. What is your business? Wilfried shall be handling it in her place."

"We finished a new picture book and wanted to give her a copy. Please deliver this to Lady Rozemyne. And here is one for you, Lord Wilfried. Please accept it as a gift celebrating our meeting," the green-eyed kid said before handing me two books. They were shoddily made—basically nothing more than bundles of paper. They were thin, tiny, and didn't even have covers; it was hard to imagine that they were actually books.

"Picture books? What kind of books are those? What do you do with them?"

"You read them. Rozemyne recently started making them, and she was looking forward to the completion of this one."

...Rozemyne made these, too?

I started flipping through one of the picture books, looking at the large black-and-white illustrations inside. Some pages had text, just like the karuta. I then glanced at the two kids, who both looked about my age. They were holding their heads high, and their eyes were full of confidence.

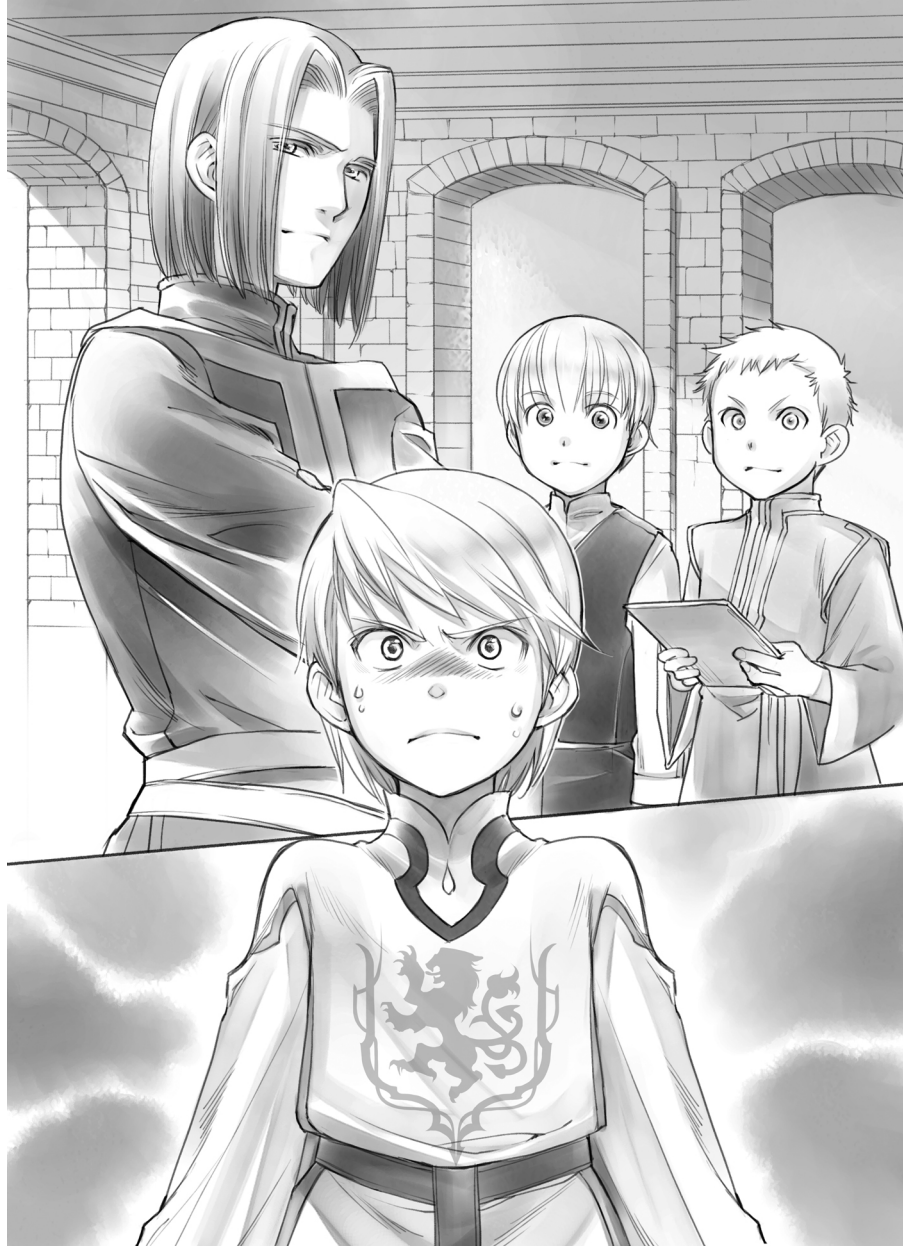
"...Can you two read this book?"

"Of course. We wouldn't be able to work if we didn't know how to read. I studied really hard to learn!" the purple-eyed kid said with a proud smile.

"It may be rare for commoners to know how to read, but even they can learn when it's necessary for work. It may be rude to present someone who can't read with a book the first time you meet them, but as you're a noble, I'm certain that we don't need to worry about that," the green-eyed kid said nervously, glancing over at Ferdinand for confirmation.

Once again, Ferdinand smirked, looking down at me with cold, mocking eyes. "Yes, anyone who has received a noble's education will know how to read. It would be quite unlikely to ever meet a noble who couldn't."

"That is a relief."



...All nobles can read, and commoners can learn when they need to for work? I could feel my expression stiffen as I looked down at the picture book.

“Return to your work, everyone. I intend to show him what exactly is done here,” Ferdinand instructed, at which point all those who had been kneeling stood up and resumed their work. I watched them go, conscious that they’d start glancing my way, and saw the kids who had given me the picture books start counting sheets of paper and giving instructions to those who had a free hand.

“Ferdinand, why are those two kids giving instructions when there are so many adults here?”

“One is an apprentice attendant and the other is an apprentice merchant, but both are close to and have been personally trained by Rozemyne. They receive direct instruction from her, operate the workshop, and give her reports. Whether due to the enormous responsibility they carry or Rozemyne’s instruction, they are both growing blisteringly fast. It might be that she has a natural talent for raising people,” Ferdinand said. He only ever insulted and mocked me, but he was praising the kids in the workshop, and Rozemyne for having raised them.

I could feel an uncomfortable heat building up in my chest.

“That was fifth bell. We’ll be returning to your chambers now. Everyone, you have worked well today. I hope to see your dedication continue.”

“As you wish,” those in the workshop replied, kneeling and giving proud smiles at Ferdinand’s praise.

With the picture books in hand, I returned to the High Bishop’s chambers. My lessons normally ended in the afternoon at fifth bell, after which I’d be free for the rest of the day, and I’d assumed the same would be true here. But once I was back, Fran started piling a ton of boards onto the table.

“What’re those?”

“The words of prayers that you must learn before leaving for the Harvest Festival. You won’t need to know about the festival itself since you won’t be going there, Lord Wilfried, but since the prayers will prove useful for magic, I think you would find it useful to learn them now,” Fran said.

Lamprecht picked up a board and skimmed it, then widened his eyes in surprise. “Are you telling me Rozemyne is memorizing this?”

“Of course. Lady Rozemyne is the High Bishop,” Fran replied with a nod, speaking like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “You know that a single mistake in noble society could give someone a negative reputation that never goes away, yes? Now that she is the

archduke's adopted daughter, Lady Rozemyne is not permitted to fail. She is having quite a tough time during her first year since every ceremony is new to her and she must continually memorize the words to new prayers, but she is managing thanks to her admirable perseverance."

Fran went on to list each ritual that Rozemyne had to give a prayer at one by one, counting on his fingers as he went. She had been assigned as the High Bishop in summer, meaning she had only experienced a single season's worth of rituals. And yet she had performed the Starbind Ceremony, the summer coming of age ceremony, the autumn baptism ceremony, and would soon be heading off to administer the Harvest Festival throughout the Central District. The High Bishop had an unbelievably busy schedule.

"I can't do this. I don't know how to read," I said, shaking my head after looking at the board with prayers written on it. Rozemyne had to memorize these, sure, but I didn't. I handed the board back to Fran, who then simply passed it on to Lamprecht.

"In that case, Sir Lamprecht will read it aloud, and you will learn by repeating what he says. You may eat dinner when you are finished."

"Wha—?!"

"Anyone can memorize something if they take it seriously. High Priest, allow me to brew some tea. You must be tired," Fran said, before smoothly heading to the kitchen. The fact that he wasn't listening to me at all made me so mad that I shouted at his back as he went.

"I don't want to! I'm not going to memorize this!" I yelled, stamping my feet in anger.

Fran turned back around with a worried frown on his face. But before he could speak, Ferdinand let out a loud, exaggerated sigh.

"Good grief. Fran, it seems that Wilfried doesn't need dinner tonight. If he hasn't finished memorizing the prayers by sixth bell, begin eating without him. The divine gifts won't be ready for the orphanage otherwise."

"Understood."

Curse. You. Ferdinand! You didn't have to say that!

I gritted my teeth and glared at Ferdinand, but he just looked back at me with cold, narrowed eyes. He wasn't afraid of me at all.

This is why bastards are the worst! I hate bastards! I silently shouted the word that Grandmother had said all the time, which calmed me down just a little even though I didn't actually know what it meant.

Now that I thought about it, there was no way they wouldn't let me eat dinner, even if I didn't memorize any of the prayers. Up until now, I had never been punished that much for skipping out on lessons

and refusing to learn to read, and this was going to be just like that. All I needed to do was wait for Ferdinand to leave.

When sixth bell rang, Ferdinand went to eat in his own chambers. I glanced Fran's way and saw that, after seeing him off, he had gone to start serving dinner.

I knew it. Of course he cares about me more than Ferdinand's orders.

I let out a pleased snort and waited for my dinner to be served. Lamprecht was excited to eat, saying that the food here tasted better than the stuff in the knight dorms, and the sweets were good enough that I was just as eager.

"My apologies for the wait, Sir Lamprecht. Your food has been prepared. Dame Brigitte has offered to eat later, so you may eat alongside Sir Damuel, if you would like."

"I-I see. I wouldn't mind eating with Damuel, but..." Lamprecht nervously looked between Fran and me.

"Do not worry, Dame Brigitte shall look after Lord Wilfried while you are having dinner. We know it would be uncomfortable for you to eat in front of him while he is unable to, so we have prepared a separate room for you," Fran said.

I was hit by such a strong wave of shock that I almost fell over. He actually wasn't going to let me eat, just as Ferdinand had ordered.

"Fran, do you have any idea what you're doing?! Don't you know who I am?!"

"I informed you that you would only be eating once you had memorized the prayers, and Lord Ferdinand has ordered me to follow through on this," Fran said calmly. The attendants in the castle would always freak out and fall over themselves to serve me, but Fran wasn't listening at all. What was going on?

"Who do you think is more important here, me or Ferdinand?!"

"Lord Ferdinand, of course."

"What?! But I'm the archduke's first son!" I yelled. "Don't lump me in with a bastard!"

In the castle, everyone said I was of a higher status than Ferdinand since he was a bastard and I wasn't. I'd assumed that Fran just didn't know that, but when I looked up to see his reaction, he was shaking his head with exasperation.

"At the moment, you are serving as the High Bishop in Lady Rozemyne's place. She has given me strict instructions not to spoil you as the archduke's son, but to treat you in the same way that she would be treated as Lord Ferdinand's ward."

"To not... spoil... me?" I stammered, unable to believe what I had just heard.

That was when the memory of Rozemyne saying, "Then you will have no problem with my attendants treating you like normal,"

flashed through my mind. I'd naturally replied to that by saying "Of course," but it still didn't make any sense.

"...Letting me eat dinner would be spoiling me?"

"Allowing you to use your status to avoid responsibilities and punishments would be spoiling you. That you think doing so is normal and appropriate shows just how spoiled you have been throughout your life, an experience not shared by Lady Rozemyne," Fran said, before turning to face Lamprecht. "Sir Lamprecht, please begin eating. We must take the leftovers to the orphanage afterward, so delays have long-reaching consequences."

"I..."

"It would be best for you to entrust Lord Wilfried to us. You are a reminder of his normal life, and while you are around, he will expect to be spoiled," Fran said with a composed smile that left no room for argument. He then took Lamprecht elsewhere, leaving me alone in a room with nobody I knew very well.

"Shall I read the board for you, Lord Wilfried?" the female knight called Brigitte asked, before taking the board and standing beside me. "The attendants here may be kind and loyal, but they are not soft in the slightest. This must be a shock for you."

She had been assigned to guard Rozemyne after her baptism, so she would probably be able to tell me from a proper noble perspective what life in the temple was like.

"Are the attendants here hard on Rozemyne, too?"

"Yes. They are doing their best to ensure that Lady Rozemyne fulfills her duties as both the archduke's daughter and the High Bishop without error. When I first started serving her, I complained to Fran that the burden on her was much too great. But ultimately he just reprimanded me," Brigitte said, offering a sad smile as she looked at the board. If things were bad enough that a guard knight had chosen to speak up, then Rozemyne's situation had to be really harsh.

"And she has more than just this to memorize?"

"Yes. She has to learn not only the prayers, but the progression of each ritual, the key points to be aware of, who to give blessings to, and the total number of people involved in each ceremony. This pile of boards contains far more information than just the words to prayers. And thus far, she has always successfully completed her duty when the time came."

I couldn't believe how different Rozemyne's life was from mine. It'd never occurred to me that I really was being spoiled that hard.

"...Read the board for me, please."

"As you wish."

Brigitte read the board aloud for me, and I repeated her words until I had memorized them. When Lamprecht finished eating and

returned, his eyes widened in surprise at me.

“I see you have worked very hard. That is excellent,” Fran said, praising me for the first time before placing enough dinner for one person on the table.

I had just barely managed to finish memorizing the prayers before seventh bell, and even though I was eating later than anyone else, the food was still steaming and warm. The chefs must have waited for me so that my dinner would still taste good.

...I get it now. They're kind, but they don't spoil anyone.

As I started eating the warm food, I let out a sigh. I really wanted to go back to the castle. I wanted to tell Father and Mother that I had memorized a prayer, and have them compliment me for doing well.

“...Eating alone is kind of sad,” I said aloud.

“Lady Rozemyne says the same thing at times.”

“Huh. Rozemyne eats here alone sometimes.”

After dinner, the attendants bathed me, and each gave me a report on their day's work. That had never happened before. My attendants were either busy attending me or searching for me; they never had any work to do when I wasn't around.

Once their reports were over, it was finally time for me to sleep. I was exhausted. I'd never been this tired before in my entire life. It was the first time I'd ever used my head so much, so despite it being earlier than I usually went to bed, I'd passed out in no time.

“It is morning, Lord Wilfried.”

No sooner had I heard the voice than someone pulled aside the curtains around my bed. I shut my eyes as tightly as I could to block out the bright sunlight.

“I'm still tired.”

“It is time to wake up.”

“Lay off. I said I'm still tired!” I yelled, pulling the covers up over my head only for them to be ripped away by force. I widened my eyes, looking for who would wake me up in such a violent manner, only to see that it was none of my usual attendants. Fran forced the mattress up at an angle, making me slide right off.

“I told you that it is time to wake up. Please get changed and eat breakfast. I have already given you as much time as can be spared.”

Morning came especially early in the temple, and this was the first time I had ever been literally forced out of bed. Fran changed my clothes, then served me breakfast. My head was really fuzzy while I ate, since I'd normally still be in bed at this time.

“After breakfast, it will be time to practice harspiel,” Rozemyne's music teacher said as she brought in the instrument. It was sized for

children, and the sight alone was enough to make me grimace.

"I'm not good with harspiels. I don't like them."

"In that case, there is an even greater need for you to practice and improve. Music is the cultured pastime of nobles," she said.

I knew that playing instruments was important for nobles, but not everyone was great at the harspiel. Karstedt had said I could one day pick up an instrument I liked myself, which explained why he was good at the flute. But when I said that to the music teacher, she just cocked her head.

"I have spent Spring Prayer with Lord Karstedt in the past, and while he prefers the flute to the harspiel, he was not incapable of playing the latter. Learning the notes and lyrics to harspiel songs is the foundation from which you develop your musical tastes. Wishing to play other instruments is no excuse to not play the harspiel."

"Wh-What the...?" I stammered. Neither Karstedt nor my music teacher had ever said anything like that.

"Not to mention, since you were baptized this year, both you and Lady Rozemyne will be debuting in the winter. I have heard from the High Priest that there is a concert where all the children play a harspiel song in public. If you do not practice, will you not be bringing shame upon yourself when you cannot do what all the other children can?" she asked, reminding me of when I was the only one who couldn't read karuta yesterday.

My cheeks flushed. Just thinking about the same thing happening in front of nobles made me feel a weird mix of pathetic, frustrated, and just plain awful.

"...Is Rozemyne practicing every day?"

"There are times when her schedule does not permit practice, but when she is in the temple, she practices every day without fail. Skills degrade if you do not spend time honing them," the instructor said before taking out some sheet music. "Nobody improves dramatically overnight, so daily practice is key. Please continue until you can play at least one song before winter. Think of nothing else. Just focus on a single song."

...I only needed to learn a single song before winter, so maybe I could manage.

That day, despite it being harspiel practice, all I did was hum the notes on the sheet music; I wasn't allowed to touch the instrument even once.

When practice ended at third bell, the instructor praised me with a pretty smile. "Very good. Upon returning to the castle, please practice moving your fingers in tune with the scales you have learned. You learned them very quickly, so you must have a good memory."

I felt a tingling sensation in my chest, maybe because I wasn't

used to being complimented. She encouraged me to keep practicing, saying that this one song was all I needed to learn to hold my head up high at the winter debut.

Back in the castle, third bell was when my morning professor would arrive. But there were no professors here. I relaxed, thinking that I was finally getting some free time, only for Fran to come in carrying a bunch of things.

“It is time to assist the High Priest with his work.”

“...Huh?”

“The High Priest is handling the bulk of the High Bishop’s work outside of performing ceremonial prayers, so in order to lessen his load, Lady Rozemyne assists him with his paperwork from third to fourth bell. Now then—please hurry up, Sir Lamprecht.”

Fran rushed me and Lamprecht along to Ferdinand’s room. There were a number of attendants there, all handling their own work. Helping out here would probably make me feel a little proud, since it was like I was on equal footing with the adults.

As I stepped inside, determined to work like the kids I had seen at the workshop yesterday, Ferdinand glanced up from his paper. “Ah, there you are. Wilfried, sit over there and practice your letters. There is a stone slate with examples for you to write on. Lamprecht, here is some math that needs to be done,” he said, pointing toward a table that his attendants were putting stone slates, paper, and cards onto. In the blink of an eye, there was ink and a calculator there as well.

“Writing letters?! So I’m not going to help with your work?!”

“What a foolish question. How in the world could you help me when you do not even know how to read and write?” Ferdinand asked, not even bothering to look up from his paperwork this time.

“But Rozemyne—”

“She could write just fine before I even met her. She quickly learned new words, and when introduced to the book room, she read its scripture so enthusiastically that I have hardly needed to teach her anything writing-related myself,” Ferdinand continued. Rozemyne had apparently learned to write without his help.

...Just what in the world is my little sister?

“Rozemyne is skilled in math, as you would expect from someone who owns a workshop and has spent so much time with merchants. The boards in front of Lamprecht contain all of the work that she would normally do. I trust that you shall handle it well, since you have so generously offered to take her place.”

Lamprecht widened his eyes at the stack of boards. He’d always empathized with me not wanting to study math, probably because he was bad at it himself.

“I thought I was here for work, but it’s just writing practice? I’m

not going to bother doing that. I'm out of here!" I declared, jumping down from my chair to run away like I always did.

But Ferdinand whipped out his schtappe and chanted something quickly under his breath. Several beams of light shot out from the schtappe and wrapped around me, making it so that I couldn't move at all. With the bands of magic holding my legs together, I clumsily fell flat on my face.

"Lord Ferdinand?! What in the world are y—" Lamprecht began in shock, but Ferdinand interrupted him by striding forward, picking me up like I was furniture, and roughly setting me back onto the chair.

"I will not allow you to run away. You said that you would be switching places with Rozemyne today. If you are truly the archduke's son, you must at least take responsibility for the promises you make," Ferdinand said, tying me to the chair with actual rope before dissipating the magic bands.

He was being so rough and disrespectful that I didn't even know what to say. I had no idea why he was being allowed to do this to me, or why nobody was saying anything to him about it.

"Lamprecht, get to work already," Ferdinand instructed. "Now is not the time to stare into space. You are wasting time."

The fact that Lamprecht immediately shot up, straightened his back, and got right to work told me that I just couldn't win against Ferdinand. With no other choice, I reached for the stone slate.

Ferdinand's room was eerily quiet. The only noises were the scratching of pens, clacks of calculators, muted requests for permission, and the quiet rustle of papers as people delivered their finished work. It felt like I was going to suffocate. I tried to practice writing at first, but soon set the stone slate aside when my hands started to hurt a little. Ferdinand noticed this and stood up, walking over to examine it.

"...Is that the best you can do?"

"Lord Wilfried is very much trying his best, Lord Ferdinand," Lamprecht answered for me.

Yeah. This is way more practice than I would ever normally do. Praise me more, I thought, cheering Lamprecht on internally. But Ferdinand just looked down at Lamprecht with the same cold eyes he gave me.

"It is because of you spoiling Wilfried in such a manner that he has grown up to be so slothful and foolish."

Lamprecht gasped, his eyes wide open. His mouth flapped as though he was about to protest, but he ultimately just bit his lip and fell silent.

Ferdinand gave a dismissive "hmpf" and then turned his icy golden eyes to me. "Wilfried, there is nobody in the castle willing to be honest with you, so it is here that I must inform you of reality. You

have neither the resolve, nor the dedication, nor the attitude that the son of an archduke needs. You have noble blood, but it is wasted on a foolish, selfish child such as yourself.”

That wasn’t true; I had the proper attitude for an archduke’s son. What’s more, Ferdinand was the only one calling me foolish and selfish. Nobody else did. Everything he was saying here was wrong.

“Ferdinand! You’re being disrespectful!” I yelled.

“Disrespectful? No, I am speaking the truth. You have been baptized, yet you cannot read, write, or do math. You are an incompetent fool who uses his status as the archduke’s son to evade all responsibility. If asked to help Sylvester with his work, you would not be able to help him in the slightest. You are a useless waste of space. Do not expect me to spoil you as well.”

I growled and glared up at Ferdinand. As much as I wanted to shout that he was wrong, I couldn’t manage the words.

“Lord Ferdinand, that is going much too far!”

“You seem to be lazing about as well, Lamprecht. Rozemyne would be long finished with that amount of work by now. You are slow. I see that both servant and master are equally useless,” Ferdinand remarked, dismissing Lamprecht’s protests before looking straight at me. “Wilfried, your father experienced much grief due to problems with succession, and as long as there are no problems with your mana, he wishes for you to succeed him as his oldest son.”

I knew that. Both Father and Grandmother had said that I’d be the next archduke.

“Sylvester seems to think that a leader can be as incompetent as he wishes so long as he surrounds himself with competent allies. But there is a difference between gathering competent allies and dragging them down into the mud, forcing them to compensate for your unending failures. And unlike Sylvester, you do not have the charisma and strength of spirit to naturally gather allies.”

“Lord Ferdinand, you are expecting too much from a young child,” Lamprecht protested.

“You call him a young child, but he has already been baptized. Furthermore, he is not just any child, but the child of the archduke. Under normal circumstances, Wilfried would need to work harder and bear more responsibility than Rozemyne, who was merely adopted into the archduke’s family. However, does it seem to you that Wilfried is indeed working harder or bearing more responsibility than her? No, it does not.”

His arguments made too much sense to disagree with. One day here was enough for me to realize just how talented Rozemyne was, as well as how hard she was working each day. Her attendants were all working together to ensure she was as well suited for her roles as the

High Bishop and the archduke's daughter as possible. She was being given a mountain of tasks each day which she always completed.

But me, on the other hand... What was I doing? My only memories were of running away from work.

"Lord Ferdinand, you're not wrong, but..." Lamprecht began, only for Ferdinand to silence him with a sharp glare, looking much, much angrier than he had been with me. For a second his light golden eyes seemed to change colors, and an instant later Lamprecht choked out a gasp, freezing in place and trembling as if glued down by the stare. As Ferdinand leaned in a little closer toward him, Lamprecht let out a weak groan of discomfort.

"Wilfried is not the only incompetent fool who puts no effort into life. You are the same. If you care for your charge's future, Lamprecht, learn to tie him to a chair and force him to study. Veronica is no longer here."

What does he mean by that?! I exclaimed in my mind.

Ferdinand then glanced my way. "Rozemyne is a unique girl in more ways than one, so I do not expect Wilfried to produce similar results. But if he wishes to be accepted as the archduke's son, he needs to work at least as hard as she is. Am I wrong?"

"...No, you are right." Lamprecht painfully forced the words out. It was like Ferdinand had cast a curse or something on him, except he didn't have his schtappe in hand. I had no idea what he was doing to Lamprecht, but all I could do was tremble as an indescribable fear built up in my heart.

"I received a report from Fran that Wilfried successfully memorized the words to prayers last night, and successfully hummed the musical scales of a harpsiel song this morning. I, myself, have been forced to accept that he was not born a fool. He can succeed when he tries and is clearly quite capable of doing so, meaning the blame falls on those who spoiled their charge and raised him into a fool. Be aware that this is *your* responsibility!" Ferdinand declared, before lowering his gaze and letting out a disappointed sigh.

At that point, Lamprecht collapsed onto the table.

"Lamprecht! Ferdinand, what did y—"

"Wilfried," Ferdinand said, interrupting me with a heavy voice. As strange as it might sound, it was so overwhelming that it really did feel like there were weights pressing against my stomach.

He was looking at me with cruel eyes—cold, dark, golden slits that showed no warmth toward me whatsoever. They were terrifying eyes unlike anything I had ever seen before, and without even realizing it, my teeth had started to chatter.

"There is nothing I would like less than to serve someone as lazy, spoiled, and incapable as you. If you continue as you are, I will raise

your siblings myself and crush your political future with all my might.”

Both Father and Grandmother had said that I would be the next archduke, and I thought that was true no matter what. I’d never even considered that someone might come and defy their words. Hearing that my future wasn’t actually secured was like a blow to the head that made me want to cry.

“It is tradition for the child with the most mana born from the archduke’s first wife to become the next archduke. You would do well to remember this,” he said.

I swallowed hard, just as fourth bell started to ring. My day spent swapped with Rozemyne had come to an end.

Hasse's Orphans

"Feels good that it's sunny today, huh, Thore? We get to go to the forest now," Rick said after breakfast, stretching in his raggedy outdoor clothes. We'd finished all the paper-making work we could do in the workshop, but two days of rain had stopped us from going outside.

I speedily changed clothes myself and agreed. "Heck yeah. I'm getting real tired of just learning manners all day. I get that we've gotta master 'em, but still."

Those of us from Hasse had to relearn everything from manners to language, which meant we always had things to do during the day. But being expected to do the same stuff every day in a closed-up space like Ehrenfest's temple was kind of suffocating.

...Still, I knew I was lucky for that to be the worst of my problems. Now, Marthe and my sister wouldn't need to be sold to anyone if they didn't want to be. Even the eating situation was better, since the stronger kids weren't given more food and didn't steal from others. Here, everyone was given the same amount, even newbies like us. We weren't even being unfairly beaten like before.

I was glad that I'd decided to go with Lady Rozemyne, and I was thankful to her. We were seriously lucky and she was an amazing person. But even knowing that, everyday life in the temple was so much different from what we were used to that it made us uncomfortable. We just couldn't get used to it.

Unlike the normal priests who lived in the temple, we liked putting on comfy, raggedy clothes and going out to the forest to gather a lot more than learning to read and speak properly. Maybe it was because we were raised doing farm work in Hasse, but we always ached to go outside on sunny days when we were stuck in the workshop. We spent each day waiting for our chance to gather and work in the forest.

Rick and I went down the stairs of the boy's building where we found Lady Rozemyne's attendant, Gil, handing out baskets and knives. We'd told him that we could just pick our own tools, but Gil said that'd make it harder to keep track of everything.

"Here, Thore. And Rick, here's yours," Gil said.

Rick and I went outside with the baskets on our backs and knives in hand. The sun was bright, but the chilly air made it clear that

winter was on its way. Still, we were so pumped to go to the forest that the cold air didn't bother us at all.

"Thore, Rick."

I quickly turned around in surprise as I heard Nora say our names. I hadn't expected her to be here, but there was a basket on her back and Marthe was beside her. They didn't have gray priest robes on, but outside clothes just like us.

"It's been a long time since we've all been outside together."

"Yeah. It's 'cause the girls and boys do different work here," I replied.

Back at Hasse's monastery, the four of us studied, cleaned, and went to the forest together. But maybe because Ehrenfest's orphanage had more people, duties were split between men and women here, which meant we couldn't stay together as much. Men worked in the workshop and the forest, while girls made food and handled cleaning.

"We're going to the forest today, Rick! Wilma said we need lots of firewood and fruit for the winter. Right, Nora?" Marthe said, looking up at my sister with a smile.

Since the orphanage was busy making preserved food for the winter, some of the apprentice gray shrine maidens were also coming to the forest to help gather.

"Marthe and I still aren't used to how they cook and clean in the temple. We'll be more useful gathering in the forest than staying here, so it's actually kind of relaxing," Nora said.

The orphanage was already packed with people, and now they had to prepare for four more on top of everyone else. A lot of resources were needed for each person, and here they were stuck with the four of us. That was why we needed to work harder than anyone else if we didn't want to feel uncomfortable all winter. Not to mention, if we started running out of food, we'd be the ones who'd have our shares taken first. They liked to talk about fairness here, but we had street smarts; we knew it'd end up a bloodbath.

...I gotta work hard so that Nora and Marthe don't have to go through that, I thought, tightening my grip on the basket on my back.

"Whew. Always feels good to be outside," I said.

"Uh huh," Nora replied.

The southern gate opened up to sprawling fields, the forest's trees, and the big blue sky. And on top of all that, the air suddenly got a lot cleaner. Outside the walls, everything was like our home town of Hasse again. That helped me relax a bit. I still wasn't used to how the temple looked, or to how nasty the air in the lower city was.

The gray priests, on the other hand, grimaced as soon as they stepped through the gate onto the road turned muddy from the recent

rain. "It would be nice if the stone road would continue outside the city, but unfortunately the archduke's power is contained within its walls," one said.

People raised in the temple were used to walking on white stone, but I hated the raw smell of the lower city when it was so humid from all the evaporating rainwater.

"Muddy roads aren't so bad if you just walk on the side of the road with all the weeds, though," I said.

"The temple is just so pretty that the people raised there don't know how to walk on muddy roads," Nora said with a giggle. "It's the same as us being uncomfortable with how clean the temple floors are. They couldn't handle field work like we can."

Now that she mentioned it, the priests would probably hate the idea of tilling a field. I'd always really enjoyed doing it since the soil gets softer over time, but I didn't think people in the orphanage would feel the same way.

"Please gather at the riverbank when fourth bell rings," Gil said when we arrived at the forest. We had all been split up into groups; some of us would make paper, others would get firewood, and the rest would gather food. The four of us had been assigned to gather fruit and mushrooms. That was my favorite job.

"Let's get going, everyone!" I said when it was time to start, a wide grin on my face. But it wasn't just Rick and Nora who replied; a gray priest whose name I still didn't know butted in.

"Thore, gathering in groups is inefficient. And please take care to speak properly. In this situation, you should say 'Shall we go?' instead."

...When I said 'everyone,' I wasn't including you! I yelled on the inside. I'd normally protest out loud, but since I knew that he'd probably end up giving me some lengthy lecture, I just said I'd be more careful next time.

At that, I took Nora's hand and pulled her away. When I turned around, I saw that Rick and Marthe were hurrying after us. And since I didn't want the priest to get in the way of us hanging out for the first time in a while, I called one last thing to him, doing my best to sound polite.

"We'll be gathering rafels over there if you need us!"

"You four certainly are good at climbing trees. In that case, we shall gather taniehs off the ground elsewhere," the priest replied peacefully, before disappearing into the trees along with the others.

The priests had only started visiting the forest a year ago, and honestly? They really sucked at gathering. They were slow runners, couldn't climb trees, and could barely tell mushrooms apart. Lady

Rozemyne was a real weirdo for sending people like them to the forest, and I could guess that Lutz had a real hard time organizing them all at the start. I never would've agreed to do it.

"Oh, there's a rafel!" Marthe declared with a smile, rushing to a tree not too far ahead of us.

Rafels were a nice autumn fruit. They looked a lot like summer ranshels, but were more sour and chewy. Cut rafels dipped in honey were super good in winter.

"...Ah," Marthe said, suddenly stopping in place. We all rushed up to her.

"What's up, Marthe?"

"The two days of rain knocked most of the rafels down. And I promised Delia that I'd gather a lot of them, too..." Marthe said, slumping her shoulders as she pointed at all the smashed fruit that had fallen from the tree.

Delia was a girl in the orphanage with a little brother called Dirk, and she was one of the very few people in the temple who understood the four of us wanting to stay together as a family. There were times when she was harsh, but she was good at taking care of people, so Marthe had really warmed up to her. I'd heard that they'd become friends after Marthe said to Delia how cute she thought Dirk was.

"I promised Delia we'd make lots of honey-dipped rafels together. She can't leave the orphanage, so I said that I'd gather them for her, but..."

Delia had committed some enormous crime at the end of spring half a year ago, and while she hadn't been executed thanks to Lady Rozemyne's compassion, she was sentenced to never leave the orphanage again. Delia herself said she was fine with the punishment since she could stay with Dirk, but I felt bad that she couldn't even go to the forest to blow off steam.

Rick patted Marthe's back and pointed up at the tree. "Don't feel so down, Marthe. Take a good look; there's still plenty left. Plus, rafels that aren't fully ripened are the best for dipping in honey. We can still get plenty to bring back to Delia," he said, being as kind to her as always.

At that, he took out a cloth meant for catching the rafels. It was my job to knock them down, and after making sure the knife was in my belt, I searched for a fruit big enough to dip in honey. Once I'd spotted one, I started climbing the rafel tree.

"Alright, it's coming down!"

"Wait, wait! You climb way too fast, Thore!" Marthe exclaimed, looking up with a smile as she spread open her cloth. When I saw that she was ready, I cut the rafel down and watched it fall.

Marthe caught the fruit, and Rick let out an excited shriek as it hit

the cloth. I could see Nora picking rafels from the ground and cutting off the parts that were still edible. We could wash those in the river and then eat them at noon.

“Thore, Thore! Cut down some more!”

“Yeah, gotcha!”

Working together with everyone made me feel like we were back in Hasse. Once we’d finished getting rafels, accompanied by lots of shrieking and excitement, it was time to gather meryls. They were almost out of season, which meant there weren’t too many left.

“Oh, that’s fourth bell,” I said. “We’ve gotta go back to the river.”

It was time for lunch, and so we headed to the river with our baskets full of gathered stuff. Once there, we found the priests cooking soup and steaming branches alongside the potatoffels. We went straight over to the river and started washing the rafels we had cut.

“Oh? May I ask what you’re holding there?” a priest washing his hands in the river asked Nora.

“There were crushed rafels on the ground, so I cut off the edible parts to chow down— I mean, to eat at lunch,” she replied.

“That’s a splendid idea. There aren’t enough for everyone, so we will need to cut them into pieces to distribute,” he said. But we had been planning to just share the fruit among the four of us, so there really weren’t that many. Trying to share them among all the priests just didn’t make any sense.

Why do we gotta share with you all...?!

I angrily stood up, only for Rick to hold me back. “Thore, you’ve got a knife too, right? Nora, we’ll help you cut them,” he said, before getting right to slicing the rafels into pieces.

I watched the priest head to the pot, then glared at Rick. “Why are you just accepting that, Rick?! We gathered those ourselves! We won’t even get a mouthful if we divide ’em between this many people.”

“I mean, that’s just how they do things in the temple. We’re getting as much food as anyone there even though we’re newcomers. Only makes sense that we’d split our food with them, too. You want them to cut down the amount of winter food we get ’cause we kept these rafels from them?” Rick asked.

At that, everything clicked. Everyone was treated equally here. We had to follow that, too.

I took out my knife and started cutting the rafels. “We were having so much fun with each other that I thought we were back in Hasse. I got kinda mad at him, like they were taking away our fun again.”

“I get how you feel, Thore. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little frustrated too,” Rick said with a sigh, watching as the rafels were sliced into tiny, tiny chunks.

“Maybe next time we should hide and eat them on our own,” Nora said with an impish smile, earning laughs from all of us. All my anger faded away as we jokingly planned out how to bring water with us to wash the rafels out of sight from everyone else.

“Didja have fun hanging out with everyone again?” I asked, plopping down onto the bed beside Rick’s once it was time to sleep.

“Yeah... But what do you think’s gonna happen to us now?”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“Er, y’know... Back in Hasse, we kept going ’cause we’d get land when we grew up, right? But orphans in the temple are completely different. I’m glad Nora and Marthe aren’t getting sold, but what’s gonna happen to us now?” Rick asked, worrying about the exact same things I was.

Sure. I was glad that Lady Rozemyne had saved us, and I was thankful to her. Every day I was glad that Nora and Marthe hadn’t been sold away by the mayor. If we could go back in time and do it all over again, I’d stick with Lady Rozemyne to protect Nora every single time.

...But what was our future gonna be like? I’d assumed that orphans were treated pretty much the same everywhere, but I was dead wrong. Those in the temple weren’t given land when they came of age, and they didn’t even get to leave the orphanage. Apprentice gray priests became gray priests, and that was that. The only way for them to leave the orphanage was to be taken on as a blue priest’s attendant, sold to some noble, or die.

All the life plans I had thought up in the past had been crushed in an instant. I had no idea what our futures would be like.

“...I really didn’t think we wouldn’t even get to go to the Harvest Festival,” I murmured. It was the biggest festival of the year—a great day where everyone could go nuts, even orphans. We had all been looking forward to it, so when we were told that we wouldn’t be able to join despite it being held so close by, we couldn’t understand what we were hearing.

But the priests didn’t understand us, either. They just looked confused, and with very serious expressions asked why we would ever be allowed to join the festival.

“We are not involved in farm work, and we have paid nothing in taxes. Furthermore, this monastery is not part of Hasse; it belongs to Lady Rozemyne. Why would we be allowed to join Hasse’s Harvest Festival when we are not its citizens? Blue priests and shrine maidens accept the taxes and perform religious ceremonies, but there are no religious ceremonies that require our presence,” I remember one priest saying.

That alone was enough for me to feel like I'd been cut away from the world I knew and sent somewhere else entirely. I was happy to have escaped Hasse's mayor, but I was just as nervous about my future.

Lady Rozemyne saved us when we didn't want to be sold away because she was a kind person. But all orphans were treated equally, and she hadn't said anything about the priests expecting us to all act like family but not quite. She wouldn't allow us to keep our own little family within the temple, since everyone there had to be equal.

"I just hope spring comes soon... I at least wanna go back to the monastery," I murmured while getting under the covers.

Rick agreed. Back in the monastery, the few priests there had adjusted themselves a bit to make things more comfortable for the four of us as we got used to our new lives. But here, we were the ones who had to adjust to everyone else. To make things worse, we were in an entirely different city, and the only time we got to be with our sisters was during meals.

I missed Hasse and its sprawling fields, nearby forests, and wide-open skies. It wasn't even winter yet and I was already homesick. There was nothing I wanted more than to run away from the temple, with all its high walls that blocked out most of the sky. We weren't Ehrenfest orphans. We were Hasse orphans.

...I wanna go back to Hasse in my dreams, at least, I thought while closing my eyes.

Justus's Grand Lower City Infiltration

"Justus, have you ever been to the lower city?" Ferdinand asked. It was the start of summer the previous year, and he had summoned Eckhart and I together.

"I've disguised myself as a traveler and visited farming towns to gather materials many times in the past, but I have never visited Ehrenfest's lower city since there is nothing to find there. Why do you ask? Is there something there after all?" I asked in response.

"A Devouring child by the name of Myne shall be entering the temple as an apprentice blue shrine maiden. I would like for you to gather as much information on her as possible. Here is what we know from the Merchant's Guild," Ferdinand said, holding out some boards. "Everything here concerns her workshop, rather than Myne herself."

I took the reports from Ferdinand and skimmed them. There were copies of monthly financial reports, the forewoman's bank statements with the Merchant's Guild, and a list of business partners.

"Myne's the forewoman, huh? As for employees... None. It says they belong to the Plant Paper Guild, but does such a guild even exist?"

"It is precisely to answer that sort of question that I need you to gather information on Myne and her activities. Here is what I know myself: Myne has blue hair as dark as the night sky, golden eyes, and a destitute constitution that causes her to appear five at best despite having been baptized. Despite being so weak that she cannot even visit the temple each day, she is such a fervent bookworm that she was willing to spend a large gold and ignore all common sense to directly ask the High Bishop to make her an apprentice shrine maiden. In short, she is a bizarre, incomprehensible child. All information on her will be valuable. Gather it all."

...A child who would spend a large gold to force her way into the temple, all just to read books? Nah, that can't be right.

As a noble, it was hard to believe that anyone would ever want to go to the temple, so I didn't know how to react to Ferdinand's claims. But at the same time, I was intrigued. I didn't know a single child who was anywhere near as interesting as this Myne seemed to be. And here Ferdinand was, asking for any information on her at all.

I smiled. My heart was telling me that things were about to get

interesting.

“You will need a servant or guard when entering the Merchant’s Guild and the store that does business with the Myne Workshop. To that end, I would like to ask for your assistance, Eckhart. Would you be willing to enter the lower city?”

“If you command it, Lord Ferdinand,” Eckhart said, wearing a smile as he knelt. He had been working with a dead expression ever since his wife Heidemarie had passed away. This was the first time in ages that I’d seen him look so motivated, and as his coworker, that was nice to see.

“In that case, prepare for the infiltration at once. You will be riding my carriage to the temple, then changing clothes there and exiting into the city through the servant door. One of my temple attendants will take you there,” Ferdinand said.

“Thank you very much.”

It was difficult for nobles to stealthily enter the lower city. Noble carriages couldn’t stop there, and when it came to purchases, merchants were simply summoned to the Noble’s Quarter. Anyone would find it strange if a poorly dressed man exited from a fine carriage that had departed from the Noble’s Quarter, so having Ferdinand engineer our entry through the temple’s servant door made things a lot easier.

I headed home, then took out the clothes I had gathered across all of my journeys spent collecting materials. Some were for farming, others for traveling. I added a few garments I had gotten from a merchant who came to the Noble’s Quarter, and the final result wasn’t too far from the clothes a noble who had dropped ranks would wear.

I also sent an ordonnanz to Eckhart, telling him to take inspiration from the clothes of the merchants who visited his estate.

On the day of the infiltration, I entered Ferdinand’s estate wearing noble clothes, and then had his attendant Lasfam change me into merchant attire.

“Ah, by the way—Lasfam, did you prepare a bag with a random assortment of vegetables?”

“Yes, Lord Justus. I was quite confused when the ordonnanz arrived with that message.”

With the bag of vegetables and a bag of clothes from Lasfam in hand, I climbed into the carriage, which slowly started heading off.

“Justus, Eckhart—here are your funds for this mission,” Ferdinand said, handing over a small bag. “You may use this money for whatever you like, whether that be gathering information or—as fifth bell is about to ring—renting a room at an inn.”

Inside the bag were six small golds and six large silvers. That was far more than one would need to rent a room, but it was a fair

payment for work such as infiltrating the lower city. I accepted the amount and gave half to Eckhart.

The carriage arrived at the Noble's Gate, at which point I entered the temple. I had never visited before since Ferdinand had always forbidden me from going near it, so I was more than a little excited to finally go inside and see what it was like. But Ferdinand had dropped us off at the back gate, saying it would be problematic if the High Bishop, Bezewanst, found us. Oh well.

"Guard, take these two to the foot door of the back gate," Ferdinand said, and the guard who had opened the door to the carriage guided us to where we needed to go.

"This is the gate to the lower city," he said.

We passed through into the lower city just as fifth bell started to ring. The horrible smell and visible filth immediately made me grimace; not even the farming towns I had visited smelled this bad, and they weren't this dirty, either.

"This is several times worse than riding through in a carriage, Justus. You sure you're up for this?" Eckhart asked.

"Ngh... Not like I have a choice. This is an order from Lord Ferdinand himself."

I first wanted to go to the south gate where Myne's father supposedly worked. Thanks to flying over the lower city and analyzing its infrastructure, I had a reasonable grasp of where everything was.

Eckhart and I started moving south down the main street. Unlike the Noble's Quarter, there were towering buildings of all sorts of colors and designs on either side of the road, with wagons and carriages traveling every which way. There were a shocking amount of pedestrians too, and not a trace of the order seen in the Noble's Quarter.

"Hm. I see that the lower city is similar in how the further south you go, the lower in status the people get," I mused upon reaching the central plaza and its fountain.

There were a wide range of people here, from those wearing the attire of travelers to those in the raggedy clothing of the poor. We had worn merchant clothes to blend in, but in reality we stuck out more than anyone.

"...Looks like we should change our clothes. Let's get an inn," I suggested.

"Agreed. The foul smell is giving me a headache," Eckhart complained. "This mission is harder than camping outside to gather materials."

It would probably be difficult to bring him to the south gate. He didn't have any cheaper clothes than what he currently had on, nor was he capable of changing his noble attitude enough to blend in. For

that reason, he would be stuck operating in the north part of the city.

We decided to get a room in an inn located close to the central plaza on the east side of town, where most travelers were. Once inside, the female head of the inn looked us over head to toe with wide eyes.

“Can’t say any fancy-looking customers like yourselves have ever come here not on a carriage. Looks to me like you’re all dressed to visit some nobles. Did yer carriage break down?” she asked.

...I see. Merchants wear different clothes when going to the Noble’s Quarter than what they usually wear.

I had visited farming towns here and there more than a few times, but now it was painfully apparent that having never walked in the lower city before was a problem. The commoner facade I had developed during my time at farming towns might not prove too useful.

While I was thinking about that, I strode forward and handled matters with the lady. “Our carriage had some problems and our normal clothes got dirty during the incident, so we had to put on our best outfits. I would like to order a large room suitable for my master’s stature.”

“I see, I see. You’ve got my sympathies. Go ahead and use the nearby well to clean your clothes if you need to; at this time of year, they’ll be dry by morning. But if you need something to wear right away, go out the back door and travel two blocks. There’s a used clothes store right there.”

“Much appreciated. We’ll check it out later,” I said, thanking the woman as I took the key from her and headed to our room. Despite having ordered a large one, it was still fairly small. Guess we couldn’t expect much more from a commoner inn.

“Eckhart, once we put our stuff down, let’s do something about our clothes,” I said.

We rushed to the used clothing store that the inn mistress had informed us of and each asked for a set of business clothes we could wear in place of our best suits, which we had been forced to put on when our normal clothes got dirty.

The store owner looked us over with a raised eyebrow. “I’m surprised you were willing to walk through town in those clothes at all. Would’ve been better to keep on the dirty ones,” he said, clearly bemused, before speedily picking out some clothes.

Once we had changed into them, we could finally walk around the city without worrying about drawing attention to ourselves.

“Hey, mister. Ever heard of the Myne Workshop? It apparently belongs to the Plant Paper Guild, but I don’t even know what that is.”

“...Myne Workshop? Sorry, pal. Can’t help you there. Never heard

of it in my life.”

It was no surprise that a clothing seller didn’t know about it. I shrugged and returned to the inn with Eckhart.

“Eckhart, now that we’ve got some normal merchant clothes, how about we head to the Gilberta Company?”

“I’m too sick to move. Give me some time to rest,” Eckhart replied. The foul smell of the lower city was so overwhelming that he’d used cleansing magic to clean his stinking clothes, but that just ended up undoing all the adapting that his nose had done. He pinched his nostrils shut with a groan, saying that he was about to throw up.

I watched him from the corner of my eye while speedily changing into farmer clothes. “I’ll go ahead to the south gate, then. Try to get used to the smell by tomorrow.”

“Forgive me.”

I grabbed the bag of vegetables and exited the inn. My plan was to search for Gunther at the south gate and then follow him home to find out where Myne lived. That way, I could get information on how she acted when she was somewhere she felt more relaxed.

As I walked down the main street, I kept an eye on my surroundings, adapting my walking speed and posture to match what I saw. *The south side of the city seems to speak a lot rougher, but what I learned in the farming towns should do me well here.*

Maybe because I had been keeping such a close eye on my surroundings, it was almost closing time when I eventually neared the south gate. The first thing I saw was a group of about ten kids with baskets on their backs returning to the lower city. This was the perfect opportunity to gather information on Myne.

I walked up to the group, pretending to be a farmer wanting to repay Myne for a favor with some vegetables from his farm. “Heya, kids. Any of you know a girl with dark-blue hair called Myne? She did me a huge favor the other day, and I wanna pay her back,” I said, raising the bag of vegetables so they could see.

“Nope. Never heard that name before. She’s not from our neighborhood,” one replied.

Another group soon came through the gate. I asked them the same question, but this time, they seemed to know her.

“Myne? You mean Tuuli, right?” one kid asked, cocking their head.

“Tuuli?”

“That’s Myne’s older sister. If she was nice to you, it was definitely Tuuli. You’re definitely mixing them up, mister.”

Thus, I learned that Myne had an older sister named Tuuli. And from that point on, I learned a lot more about Tuuli. She was kind, considerate, and took care of everyone, especially her sick little sister.

She was the only one they wanted to talk about, though; not a single kid said anything about Myne. In fact, they said so little about her that I honestly wanted to ask whether the two really were sisters.

“...Uh, and what kinda girl is Myne?”

“Dunno. She’s always sick in bed. I’ve, like, never talked to her,” another kid said.

And thus, I learned that they knew Myne was incredibly sickly. That all but confirmed we were talking about the same person, which was nice, but I already knew she was sick from what Ferdinand had told me. I wanted *new* information.

“If you want to know about her that much, why not ask Tuuli?” one girl asked. “Look, she’s right over there. Tuuli!”

At that, a green-haired girl holding the hand of a small child started to walk over, blinking in confusion. Her clothes were covered in patches and were a little dirty due to her having just come from the forest, but she looked cleaner than everyone else thanks to her hair being glossy for some reason.

“I’m looking for a girl named Myne. She did me a favor, and I wanted to give her these vegetables. Everyone’s saying she’s your little sister,” I said.

“Myne is my little sister, but are you sure she helped you? I think you’re probably mistaking her for someone else,” Tuuli said, looking very confused despite being Myne’s older sister. Was it really that unthinkable for Myne to help out a farmer?

All the signs were pointing to Myne having an awful personality, and now I was real worried about Ferdinand taking her into the temple as an apprentice blue shrine maiden.

“...I might’ve misheard her name, but I’m pretty sure she said it was Myne. What, is your little sister, like... a rotten girl who never helps anyone?”

“No. It’s just... When you met Myne, was she with anyone?” Tuuli asked.

Since making up lies here would complicate things in the future, I said she was alone, just to keep things simple.

The moment Tuuli heard that, she smiled. “Then you’re definitely mixing her up with someone else. Myne never goes outside alone. We don’t let her, ’cause she’s so sick that it’d be dangerous for her to walk around by herself.”

And so, I learned that Myne was in fact so sickly that she couldn’t even go outside alone. But again, I was looking for information not related to her health. It’d be hard to keep gathering info using this cover story now that Tuuli had concluded I wasn’t actually talking about her little sister, so I’d need to change my battle plan.

“Alright, know anything about the Myne Workshop, then? I hear

she's the forewoman over there."

"Never heard about it," one kid answered. "What kinda workshop is it? It's not around here, right?"

It seemed that none of the kids knew about it, but Tuuli gave me a visibly guarded look. This must have been information that only her family knew about, so just asking about it was enough to make them suspicious.

"I heard it's a paper workshop, but I dunno the details. Nobody I've met knows anything, either. I musta just misheard her. My bad for stopping you. Here, have some veggies for the journey home," I said, handing out the vegetables to the kids before continuing toward the south gate. I could feel Tuuli's eyes on my back more than a few times as I went.

After a short while I turned around, just in time to see them disappearing into an alley. From there, I tracked the group to confirm where Myne lived. Suffice to say, it wasn't the kind of building that a girl who had a large gold to spare would be living in.

After that I went to the south gate, where I learned that Gunther was absent due to being on morning duty. I tried asking the guards about Gunther's daughter instead, but all I learned was that he was head over heels for his family.

"Don't go digging into Gunther's family if you know what's good for you. He'll either rave about his wife and cute daughters until your ears fall off, or threaten the crap out of you if he thinks you're trying to hurt them," one guard said with a genuinely concerned look. Everyone else there seemed to agree with him.

...That told me all I needed to know about how her family worked, but I still didn't have anything about Myne herself. What kinda life did she live to run a workshop without basically anyone knowing about it?

"So you learned where she lives and what her family's like, then?" Eckhart asked.

"Yeah. I never would have thought that the people around Myne would know so little about her. She barely leaves her house, and when she does, she's so weak that she needs someone to come with her no matter what. It's pretty clear that we'll learn nothing if we keep trying to play by the book."

"What's your plan, then?"

"We'll sneak into the Merchant's Guild at night. They should have plenty of documents on the Myne Workshop," I replied, looking out the window as I changed from my farmer attire into merchant clothes. If the people around her didn't know anything, then I'd have to check out her place of work.

I agreed with Eckhart not wanting to eat food from such a filthy place, so we had some of our Knight's Order field rations and then took naps.

Seventh bell rang some time later, and gradually, the loud bustle of the main street calmed down. The clatter and yells of arguing drunks and soldiers maintaining order faded, by which time Eckhart's nose had readjusted to the air.

We ran through the now quiet lower city, making our way to the Merchant's Guild. A drunkard blocked our path halfway through, but Eckhart quickly drove him away.

"There's a magic lock, but it seems like a fairly weak one. What's even the point in it?" Eckhart asked once we'd arrived.

"Commoners don't have any mana, so I'd guess any magic lock would stop them in their tracks," I replied. The plan had been for Eckhart to just smash the lock in the case that it was a normal metal one, but this required a different approach.

...Seems like this is the work of a layscholar. Should be easy to unlock.

I whipped out my schtappe and unlocked the door in no time, then slid inside and used a candle with light-amplifying magic to illuminate the floor as I climbed the stairs.

We found another magic tool on our way up; it seemed this Merchant's Guild used a few of them. The magic tools supplied to commoner organizations such as this one were often maintained with feystones containing layscholar mana, and this demand was a fairly important source of income for the poorer nobles.

"Justus, what magic tool is this?" Eckhart asked.

I touched the feystone part of the tool with my schtappe and carefully looked at the magic circle carved within. "Seems like it has a simple identification function. All we have to do to pass is register our mana," I replied.

We registered our mana, causing a gate that was blocking the staircase to fade away. It seemed the upper level was just for the richer merchants, and there was a thick carpet spread across the floor, which was more spacious than the last one. We opened a door to the side in search of a file room and began looking through the documents within. They were organized by the name of the workshop, and our search progressed relatively quickly thanks to how tidy it all was. Whoever worked here must have been fairly talented.

"The Myne Workshop mainly deals with the Gilberta Company, but I see some transactions with a lumberyard and a craftsman. Let's check around the Gilberta Company tomorrow," I suggested.

The next day, we headed to the Gilberta Company dressed as merchants. A guard standing outside by the door swiftly went inside

as we approached, and not long after, a narrow-eyed servant with dark-brown hair came outside and pressed his right fist against the palm of his left hand.

"I am Mark, of the Gilberta Company. May I ask what business you have with our humble store?" he asked. His smile was peaceful, but I could tell he was on guard; his wary eyes reminded me of Tuuli from yesterday. At the very least, it was clear that he didn't intend to accept us inside as customers. It was possible that he had been informed we were investigating the Myne Workshop.

I glanced at the Gilberta Company behind him. I had thought they would be selling plant paper, but it seemed they mainly dealt in clothing and apparel.

Guess the used clothing store from yesterday sold us out.

Either way, it would be better to find information elsewhere than to push matters and put them more on the defensive.

"I just saw some strange hairpins from outside and got curious. We'll be staying out here."

"I see. Take your time, then."

We watched for a short while as customers and employees filtered in and out of the Gilberta Company, then left.

"Are you sure we didn't need to go inside, Justus?" Eckhart asked.

"The Gilberta Company's on guard against us. Let's try somewhere else," I replied.

There was no harm in going to the various craftsmen that Myne had ordered from. People who had actually done business with her would naturally have more information for me.

"Myne? Who's that? Can't say I know that name," a guy from the lumberyard said with a hand on his chin.

"She's a weird little girl with connections to the Gilberta Company. Pretty sure she's a forewoman who's done business here before," I explained, trying to jog his memory.

"Ah, the tiny girl from Benno's place! They don't really say her name much so it slipped right by me."

"That's just because you don't like to do paperwork," a passing worker mentioned, clearly exasperated.

"Shut it! Get back to work!" the foreman shouted back before shaking his head. "Whaddaya wanna know about her?"

"She came to us with a business deal too, but we don't know if she's actually a proper forewoman or not. We just don't feel comfortable doing business with a girl that small," I said with a faux worried tone.

The foreman nodded in understanding. "Yeah, I get how you feel. But you don't got anything to worry about. Benno's backing her, and she knows exactly what she needs. She don't talk or act like a kid her

age, but she's good at what she does. Even saw her write a supply order right in front of me, no problem at all. She can do business just like an adult. No need to worry about the pay, either. It'll come," he said confidently, giving me the most meaningful information yet.

It seemed like it would be a good idea to refer to her as "the weird little girl backed by the Gilberta Company" to her other business partners.

And my instincts were right. When I went to the stores and spoke to those she did business with, all I needed to do was bring up this weird little girl and say I was worried about how young she was to get people to talk.

She looked young enough to be pre-baptism, but ordered things that people had never seen or heard of before. She spent money in an abnormal way. She was clumsy with her hands. She bought a ton of string. She passed out on the street and had a Gilberta Company worker hurriedly carry her home. All in all, I was getting so much easy information that it felt like all of my struggling before had been a joke.

"Everywhere I go, people call her a weird girl, but it sounds to me that she's more extraordinarily talented and knowledgeable than weird," I said. "A smart child capable of doing skilled work sounds like the perfect apprentice blue shrine maiden for Lord Ferdinand to take in."

Eckhart nodded. "Agreed. It seems we will have a positive report for Lord Ferdinand now."

I nodded as well and looked over the market, in a good mood. It was market day by the west gate, and there were a ton of interesting-looking stands lined up. No markets were ever held in the Noble's Quarter, and I had never seen this many stands set up together during my time in farming towns.

"Want to take this opportunity to look around?" I asked Eckhart.

"...You don't want to leave as soon as possible?"

I shrugged and told him to go back to the inn to get our stuff together, then started wandering around. The market was filled with miscellaneous stands that stocked all sorts of things I didn't recognize or understand. One had a fancy case with an actual book inside it for some reason—a book that was a lot fancier than what you would expect to see around these parts.

"Hey, shopkeep. What's with the book? This isn't the place for something like that, right?" I asked, pointing at the book.

The shopkeep looked at it and shook his head. As it turned out, the guildmaster of the Merchant's Guild had apparently called for him out of nowhere and told him to go and visit a laynoble, mentioning that they were interested in funding a store for him. The shopkeep of

course ran over with a ton of money, overjoyed at his opportunity. But once there, he was asked whether *he* was going to be lending *them* money, and was then promptly ordered by the noble to hand over his coin.

The book had apparently been forced onto him as collateral for the loan, and when the due date for the return came, the shopkeep visited the noble... only for the house to have since changed hands. A noble he didn't recognize at all came out, said he didn't know the merchant, and then kicked him out.

"In short, they go out of their way to call merchants like me over to fund their escapes. The owners of big stores can afford contract magic, so they target poor merchants like me looking to start our own stores," the man continued.

The financial hit was apparently severe enough that the man had petitioned the guildmaster for payment, but he had simply responded that it was a necessary step in the process of getting a noble-funded store and paid only a small consolation fee.

"Nobles teaming up to trick commoners, huh? That's not uncommon, but you've got my sympathy," I replied. Despite being a noble myself, I didn't feel the need to defend their actions at all. I absent-mindedly replied to his complaining while looking at the book's cover.

...Still, a laynoble had this book? It's way too fancy for a laynoble.

It had an elaborate cover that one would expect to see on the book of an archnoble, and most books with that sort of cover were usually about magic. That was strange, though, since a noble with money problems selling a magic-related book to a commoner would really need to buy it back. They tended to have the crest of the noble that owned it emblazoned inside, so one look would have likely been enough to tell me exactly who had pulled such a dirty trick to rip off the shopkeep.

"Hey, shopkeep. My boss is a real booklover, and he's got a bit of a collection. Mind letting me look at the book? You can hold this for insurance," I said, setting a small gold on the table since I knew he'd be afraid of me stealing the book otherwise.

His face lit up as though he had finally found hope, at which point he unlocked the case and delicately took out the book. "I'm just gonna pray that it's a book your boss doesn't already own. The only other person who's wanted to see it was this weird little girl who crossed my stand way back when I was still holding it as collateral."

"A weird little girl? What kinda girl?" I asked on instinct, since I had been asking people for information on a weird little girl over and over all day.

"At first she asked to look at the book, but then she suddenly

threw herself on the ground and started begging to smell it and rub her cheeks against it. That was as surprised as I've ever been. Never met a kid that weird in my life."

I couldn't help but snort. That was exactly how Ferdinand said Myne always acted.

...Wait, is he talking about Myne? Is this Myne here? I wanna see this. I wanna see this weird girl.

"What, do you know this girl?" the shopkeep asked.

"Nah, but I've heard of another weirdo just like her. Not sure whether it's the same person, but I know of a girl who was trying to pay a large gold to the temple just to see a book."

"You've gotta be kidding me. That's just ridiculous. With that much money, you could just buy a bunch of books yourself."

"I didn't hear her mentioning the smell of ink or anything, though. Probably a different person," I said, exchanging another chuckle with the shopkeep.

But in reality, I was confident they were the same person. No way were there two kids in the world who were so desperate for books that they would lose their minds over them.

"Alright, let's take a look," I said, picking up the book and opening it carefully. The last page, which normally had the noble crest on it, had been sliced off—a sign that whoever had sold the book didn't want it being seen. There was a chance it was a stolen book, but either way, it was indeed a book about magic, which wasn't something best left with commoners.

I wanna buy this, but the price might be a little high.

I glanced at the pouch of money that Ferdinand had given me. I had two more small golds on top of the small gold I had handed over as collateral, but that wasn't enough to buy a book with a cover this elaborate.

"So? Does your boss own it?"

"Nope, this is a new book. I'd like to buy it, but this is all I can offer you," I said, taking out the other two small golds. I would have liked to cover all the money that the trickster noble had taken from him, but I would need to go back to the Noble's Quarter to get more for that. "This stand only goes up on market day, right? I'm gonna be leaving the city today, so..."

"Nah, that's more than enough! I never thought I'd get the opportunity to sell it at all, so yeah..." the shopkeep replied.

Considering the quality of the book, buying it for three small golds was an incredible steal, but the shopkeep seemed more than happy with the exchange.

The next day, I was summoned to Lord Ferdinand's estate to

report what I had learned in the lower city.

“...And so, the only thing I learned from the people around her was how weak she is. But those who have done business with the Myne Workshop all recognized her as a weird but talented child,” I said.

“I knew that she was weird from the first time I met her,” Ferdinand murmured in response.

“Furthermore, I believe that this is the book she said she wished to smell the ink of,” I said, explaining how the shopkeep of the stand had mentioned a weird little girl interested in the book.

Ferdinand had a distant look in his eyes. “Now that you mention it, when first faced with the bible, she leaned forward and smelled its ink.”

...She did the same thing in front of Ferdinand?! What kind of mad girl is this Myne?

“Lord Ferdinand, shall I bring this book to the temple library?”

“You said yourself that it is a magic book. Deliver it to the library in my estate,” Ferdinand said, placing three small golds in front of me.

And so the book I had purchased from the lower city was stored on one of Lord Ferdinand’s bookshelves, forever escaping Myne’s ink-sniffing clutches.

“So you’re the tax official assigned to Rozemyne, Justus? Impressive, considering that you are Lord Ferdinand’s attendant, not a scholar,” Eckhart said with an exasperated tone.

I snorted and shook my head. “I’ve got scholar qualifications, and I’ve been doing scholar work in the castle ever since Lord Ferdinand entered the temple. He said that he doesn’t have any other scholars he can trust, and with the aub’s orders backing me, there’s nobody who can argue with me being here. Especially when Rozemyne’s father, Lord Karstedt, agreed to it.”

Eckhart and I were waiting in a meeting room for Ferdinand and Rozemyne to arrive. This would be my first time meeting her. My first time meeting the fabled Myne, who had risen from a commoner to a blue shrine maiden thanks to her mana, only to then displace Bezewanst the High Bishop and be adopted by the archduke.

I know she’s a weird kid, but let’s see just what kinda fancy noble girl she’s turned into.

“Information on her was considerably hard to find, and she’s so special that Lord Ferdinand willingly took her into his custody. I’m real interested in seeing just what kind of a kid she is. Whaddaya think about her, Eckhart? Now that you’re her big brother and all.”

“I am just glad that Lord Ferdinand seems to be enjoying himself. Though personally, I would rather never go to the lower city again,”

he replied with a scrunched up face. And that was when the door opened.

“Eckhart, Justus—I appreciate you both waiting for us.”

Afterword

Hello again. It's me, Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 3 Volume 2*.

In this volume, four new orphans joined Hasse's monastery. Their lives were very different from those in Ehrenfest, and the situation between them and Hasse proved to be very problematic.

Rozemyne gained a lot of authority through Sylvester adopting her. But by using that authority without understanding the impact it would have on her surroundings, she ended up coming across as a greedy property-stealing tyrant despite just trying to save orphans from being abused.

Ferdinand gave her a task to teach her how to plot the downfall of others, leading her to tearfully request the help of the Gilberta Company. As expected, it was Lutz who saved her as she broke out into tears.

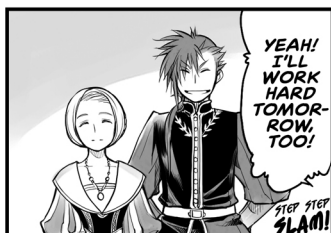
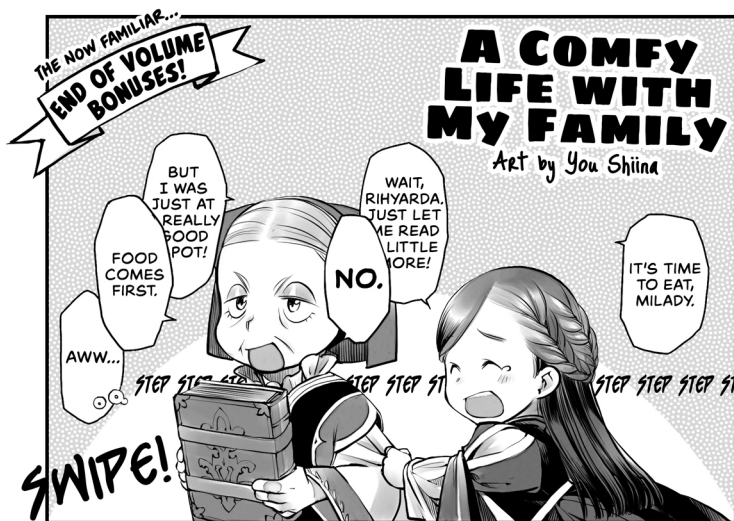
Meanwhile, Rozemyne hatched a plan to teach Wilfried a lesson after he repeatedly called their situation unfair, despite how miserable of a time she was having with Ferdinand's task. She spent a day of absolute bliss in the castle's library after they switched places, whereas Wilfried had a very bad time in the temple.

This volume also marked the beginning of Part 3's overarching goal: the gathering of materials that form the ingredients for a jureve potion. In this book, they went to gather a purple ruelle on the Night of Schutzaria, a wondrous event that happens only once a year. I hope that this volume captured the feel of a fantasy adventure.

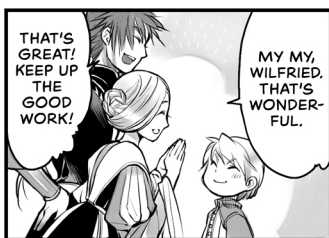
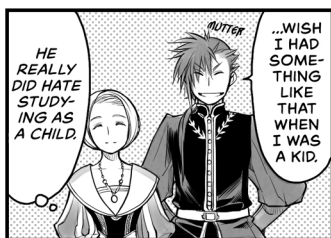
This volume's cover art features Sylvester and Wilfried, father and son. Sylvester's personality isn't especially cool, but since it's the cover art, I asked for him to be making a pose befitting an archduke. Isn't it wonderful? Thank you, Shiina You-sama.

And finally, I offer up my highest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 3 Volume 3.

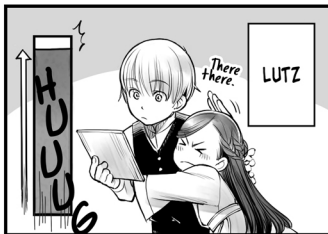
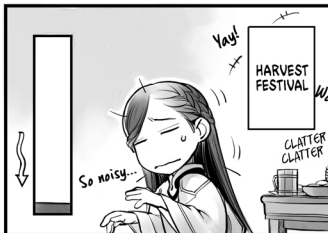
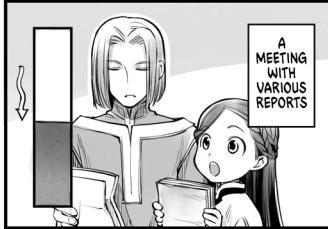
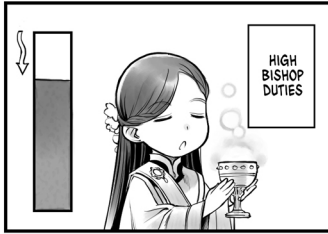
October 2016, Miya Kazuki



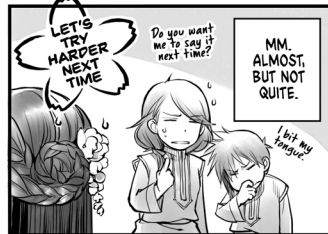
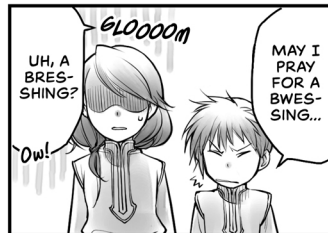
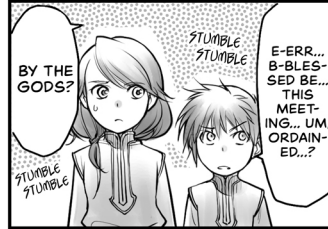
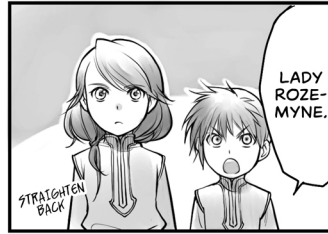
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